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The Great Cleric

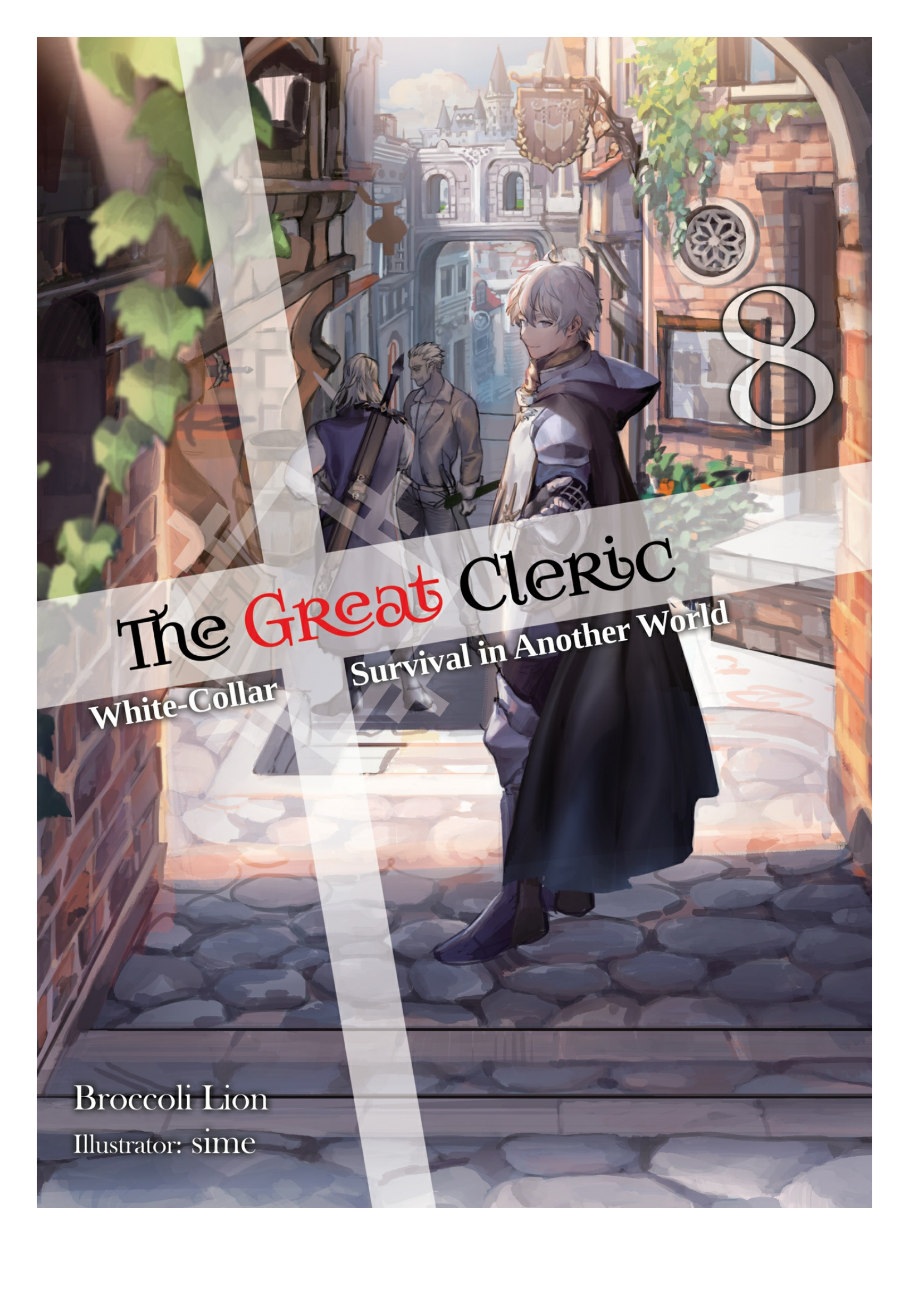
White-Collar

Survival in Another World

Broccoli Lion

Illustrator: sime





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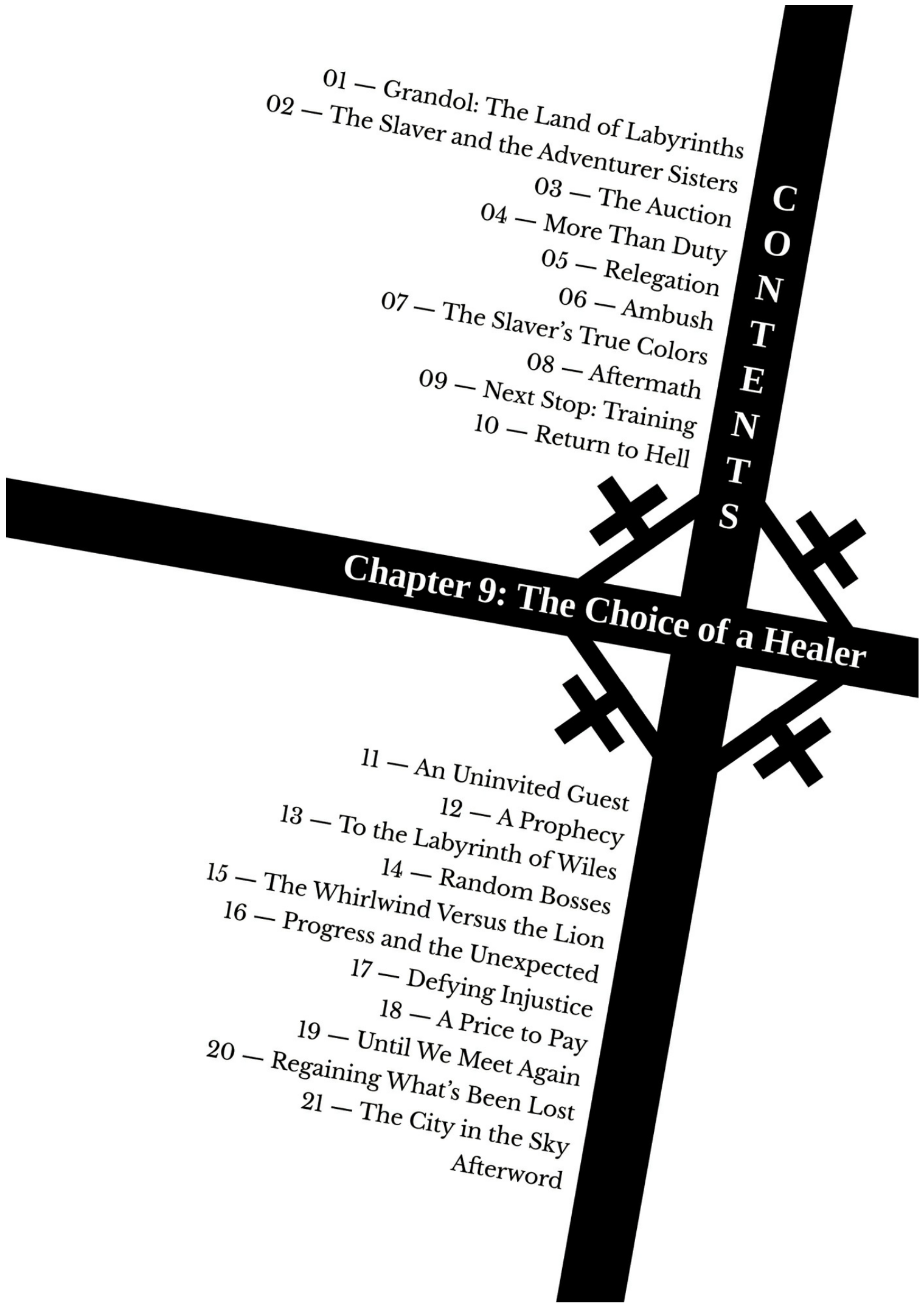
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Chapter 9: The Choice of a Healer

01 — Grandol: The Land of Labyrinths

After undoing the Wicked One's curse on the Thunder Dragon, I made a promise to rescue a mystic in the Labyrinth of Wiles. And so we set out for Grandol in order to fulfill it.

"Master, are you sure we should cut through here?" I stared out at the great, barren field. The mine that should have been there had been whisked away, mountain and all...a consequence of the door to the dragon being removed, most likely.

"You wanna get there quick or not?"

"Shouldn't we be going through immigration or customs or something?"

"I'm a guildmaster. We'll be fine. Thought this was an emergency."

"I mean, it is." I supposed there was no guarantee anyone would even be present at the checkpoint, like the fortress between Yenice and Shurule.

"I'll cover for you if anyone gives us trouble." Brod sneered. "Unless you're scared."

It seemed my fear that the mountain would conveniently pop back into existence just as we were crossing through was written all over my face.

"Fine, let's just go if you're so confident."

He chuckled. "Good man."

"The only reason I say that is because you're here."

"Don't get too comfortable. I've got plenty of ideas for when your training starts."

"Feel free to stop thinking of those whenever."

We crossed the clearing safely and successfully reached Grandol thereafter.

Upon entering Grandol territory, we weren't greeted by the typical paved road, but by wild foliage and overgrown grass. No carriage made by Dhoran would let that slow it down, though, and we proceeded as smoothly as if the path were clear.

"Fancy wagon you got," Brod commented. "Could use one myself."

"A dwarven friend of mine made it," I replied.

"Those guys know how to make good stuff. Where's he at now?"

"Leading the Research and Development department of Luciel and Co. in Yenice."

As much as I trusted Brod, I probably shouldn't go talking about Rockford to everyone. And I wasn't exactly lying. They'd told me they had some ideas for new stuff to make back in Yenice.

"Maybe I'll buy one of these when we're through here."

"We'd appreciate the business. You won't be disappointed," I said. "Oh, you might not know that my dwarf friend is actually Dhoran. He's a master blacksmith and studied with Grand."

"Had a feeling. No amateur can make something like this." Brod snorted. "S-rank healer, dragonslayer, and now business owner. Finally give up on living that peaceful life you always wanted?"

"Not yet. That's still my goal, of course. There've just been a few obstacles that needed my attention first."

I surprised myself just then. I had never really gone out of my way for anything in my past life. In fact, I'd made a point to *avoid* trouble. This world had changed me, but for some reason, it didn't feel like a bad thing.

"What's that funny look for?" my master asked.

"Nothing. Don't forget what you said earlier," I reminded him.

"Oh, don't worry. I've got this."

Somehow, I felt like we weren't talking about the same thing. I didn't think

Brod was very enthusiastic about smoothing over immigration bureaucracy issues. Regardless, we soon came to a proper highway.

“How familiar are you with the geography here?” I asked.

“You’re askin’ that *now*?” he replied. “Used to live here back in my adventurin’ days.”

“Then you’ve heard of the Labyrinth of Wiles?”

“Nah, I made my living off taking jobs, not labyrinth hopping.”

I glanced around at the others. Lionel and Ketty had nothing to add on account of having lived in Illumasia, and neither did Estia or Kefin. I had assumed the Spirit of Dusk would know something, but she had yet to grace us with her presence.

“In that case, we should gather some information at a village or town somewhere.”

“There’re more labyrinths in Grandol than anyone cares to count,” Brod said. “Most of ’em have towns built nearby, so we’ll come up on one soon enough.”

“That’s a country of adventurers for you.”

“I should take the driver’s seat from here on,” he continued. “Grandol’s got plenty of beastfolk, but we’re close to Blanche, so could be trouble.”

“Human supremacists. I’m figuring out new things about the world every day.”

“That’s why you’re out here, ain’t it? To learn.”

“It’s part of it, yeah.”

My master took the carriage’s reins while Lionel and I proceeded on horseback. Eventually, a large fortress came into view to our right.

“Damn, that was fast,” Brod remarked. I looked aside at him, and he seemed a little uncomfortable.

“You know what that is?” I asked.

“It’s the border between Grandol and Blanche. That fortress there marks it.”

“*That?* It looks like all it’s good for is shelter.”

“Exactly. They say it was made by heroes Blanche summoned to protect them from monsters flooding in from Grandol, and it’s sturdier than it looks.”

Summoned heroes. Had they been from Earth, I wondered? It looked awfully simple to have been based on Earth technology. But conjecture wasn’t really important compared to the *real* exciting implication here.

“I take it that means you know where we are,” I said.

“Yeah. We’ll take a left here, and on this thing we should be at the capital in less than two hours.”

Perhaps his uncomfortable expression earlier had been sadness that our trip together was nearing its end. That would be nice. But it also meant we were nearing the beginning of my hellish training, which was less nice. The mystic came first, though, of course.

“Let’s hurry ahead,” I said.

We made the turn and picked up the pace. But then I felt something. Something pulling me back.

“What is it?” Brod asked.

“Nothing...”

I pressed on. I had to make good on the Thunder Dragon’s wish and find the Labyrinth of Wiles. We continued on without incident or even a single monster encounter.

“I wasn’t expecting so few monsters,” I commented. “Maybe they’re all surging towards Shurule?”

“They damn well better not be,” Brod growled. “I’ll have to check in with HQ about that.”

“Don’t you have an arclink crystal to use?”

“Why the hell would I carry something that huge with me?”

I had forgotten my privilege for a moment. “You know, Luciel and Co. can make them small and portable,” I said, presenting one.

“Shit, you’re right. That from your dwarf friend again?”

“His granddaughter, actually. She’s a talented artificer.” *And a glutton for magic stones*, I added silently.

“What can’t you do these days? I could use about five of those, if you’ve got ‘em.”

“Luciel and Co. thanks you for your patronage.”

“Try not to let the entrepreneurship go to your head, yeah?”

“I’ll keep that in mind within reasonable limits, but don’t expect me to be a charity,” I told him.

“Fine by me.”

As we neared the capital, we began to pass more carriages and adventurers.

“Luciel,” Brod said, “we’re gettin’ close. There are going to be a lot of adventurers from now on, and a lot of them don’t especially like healers.”

“I’ll be careful,” I assured him.

“You do that. You might’ve done a lot to reform things, but you’d best operate under the assumption that you’ve left that reputation behind at the border.”

In other words, I had a less than warm welcome waiting for me. Good thing I had Lionel and the others watching my back. I did admire my master’s way of nonchalantly displaying concern for other people, though, and it spoke to his character. I had to do my best to not embarrass him until the day finally came when I could surpass him.

“Advice noted,” I said. “But don’t worry too much. I’m technically still an adventurer.”

“True. And with the way you’re built, I doubt they’ll mistake you for some scrawny spell thrower.” He smiled fiercely, but I didn’t see what was so funny, given my life was on the line here.

“Should I take my robe off?” I asked.

“Sir, that would rid us of all the fun,” Lionel remarked.

“Knockin’ out fools who give us the stink eye sounds like a nice introduction to me,” Brod growled with a smirk. “Anyone got a flag we can put up?”

“No,” I stated firmly. As one-sided as I was sure those fights would be, the damage done to my sanity would not be negligible.

As the sun hid behind a single drifting cloud, a sentiment I could relate to immensely, we at last arrived in the capital.

The entire city was centered around one great big building: Adventurer’s Guild Headquarters. The impact this had on the city’s infrastructure was evident by the curved outer walls, but what caught my eye more was the complete lack of seams in the construction. They must have been formed by magic, and it wouldn’t even be that far-fetched considering what I knew Dhoran was capable of. I wondered if they had any records on hand, because it would make a great reference for that town in Yenice I was still hoping to create.

“Here we are,” Brod said.

“Definitely looks like a capital,” I said. “So many people, and the streets are so clean and organized.”

“The whole country was nearly destroyed a long time ago. Story goes when they rebuilt everything, they did it clean and coordinated. I bet I know what you’re thinkin’ the city’s name is.”

“Is it not Grandol?” I asked.

“It’s Aecius. They say the whole region used to be called that, after a fertility goddess the locals worshiped. Back when the city wasn’t half the size it is today.”

“Where’d the name Grandol come from?”

“Well, Aecius represents fertility, but over time people started to worship her as a goddess of war, probably because of all the labyrinths. But right at the peak of her little transformation, a massive monster stampede broke out from just about every labyrinth. Rumor has it, there was kind of a movement to revert her image after that.”

“That just sounds like bad timing.”

“Pretty much,” Brod said. “So the goddess of fertility got her role back, but saying her name became a sort of taboo for anyone but farmers who worship her, out of fear that she’ll smite the people who stopped praying to her as a goddess of war, or make more labyrinths.”

“Well that sounds kind of petty,” I admitted. “So the city’s still called Aecius.”

“Out of respect. The Adventurer’s Guild Headquarters passes the story down and hosts a festival in her honor every year, to try and keep the name alive.”

“So even if the people forget, the leaders of the country don’t. Thoughtful of them.”

“Guess you could say that. So you remember that Adventurer’s Guild HQ is in Grandol, but also in a town called Aecius.”

“Will do.”

I had a feeling Brod wasn’t giving me a trivia lesson for no reason. Whatever he was trying to tell me, I didn’t understand it yet.

“You better put the carriage in your bag or it’s gonna get cramped,” he suggested. “Let’s head to HQ.”

“Right.”

I beckoned Forêt Noire and the other horses into the hermit key and willed the carriage into the magic bag, but I had done it in front of a crowd in my negligence, making us the center of attention. All according to Brod and Lionel’s plan, I was willing to bet.

I sighed before following my master.

The streets were lined with inns and armories of varying degrees of quality, as one would expect to find in a city of adventurers, and the closer to the center you went, the nicer the neighborhoods became. The Adventurer’s Guild was on a scale incomparable to any branch I’d seen, with doors in every cardinal direction and an even *bigger* building standing behind it.

“What’s that place in the back?” I asked.

“HQ itself,” Brod answered. “Only guildmasters or local staff are allowed in.”

“Have you gone inside before?”

“Course I have.” He smirked. “They keep track of Substance X consumption there too.”

I wondered if they knew how much I’d drunk, then immediately lost interest when I realized there would probably be no prize for holding first place. Knowing what the stuff actually did, I could understand wanting to encourage others to drink it, but the fact that *they* didn’t know the full extent of its effects just made it kind of sad.

“You should make prizes to give to the person who drinks the most every year,” I suggested.

“Why, so you can win it every time? Not happening. We don’t need more freaks.”

“I don’t like that implication.” I sighed. “Let’s just find out where the labyrinth is.”

Brod nodded and opened the door. Ketty and Kefin went next, followed by me, Estia, then Lionel. The hall was filled with adventurers, many of whom bore nasty injuries. We hadn’t encountered many monsters on the way, but maybe the fighting had been just as bad here as it was in Shurule.

My master turned around and looked me in the eye. “Luciel, can you heal them?”

I was powerless against his pleading gaze. “I’d be a pretty bad apprentice to disobey my master,” I said. “Even if I’d rather not associate with the ones giving me and my robe nasty looks right now.” Brod snorted. “What?”

“Remember when you used to flinch at the slightest shadow of an adventurer?”

“Well, now I have you, Lionel, and everyone else with me.” I smiled at him.

“You don’t make this fun,” he grumbled.

“I try. You could compliment my growth for once, you know? Anyway, where to?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He and Kefin went over to the reception desk while the rest of us stayed behind to avoid crowding the place. As we found a table near the entrance to wait at, we overheard a conversation.

“You heard the rumors about the Labyrinth of Wiles?” an adventurer asked.

“The hell’s got you all riled up?” another replied. “Who cares about that death trap?”

“Just listen. You know those adventuring sisters, Nadia and Lydia, right? Word is they screwed up and got turned into criminal slaves!”

“What? As if those two would go and commit a crime, much less get *caught*.”

“The older one’s a master swordswoman and the other uses spirit magic, right?” someone asked.

“Maybe they got done in by the party they were with.”

“Maybe. I did hear they’ve had targets on their backs ever since the Lineage of the White Wolf stopped teaching them. Man, that’s still hard to believe. Bet they’ll sell for a fortune.”

“Oh yeah. They’re gettin’ auctioned for sure.”

“There goes that dream.”

“Who knows, maybe we’ll find a money tree somewhere.”

Suddenly, I had two options: find the Labyrinth of Wiles and head straight there to save the Drakesworn like I told the Thunder Dragon I would, or go to the auction and buy those sisters. Man, they just had to mention the Lineage of the White Wolf. I could have treated them to some beer, gotten the information we needed, and been off, but if those women were in a tight spot, I didn’t want to leave friends of the Lineage in trouble. In times like these, it always felt like someone was there to show me the way, and this time it was surely Monsieur Luck playing that role.

I noticed my team looking at me and thought for a moment. “I guess we’re lucky those adventurers are loud talkers.”

“What will we do?” Lionel asked.

“I don’t know who those girls are, but if they’re friends with the Lineage and they really did learn from them, then I want to do something.”

“As I knew you would,” Lionel said, his excitement evident.

“The harem grows!” Ketty interjected. I knew she was fishing for a reaction.

“I would like to meet this spirit magic user,” said Estia, the only one with an innocent interest, given her personal connection to the Spirit of Dusk.

“The spirit magic user could be useful, and her sister too,” I remarked. Still, I wasn’t looking for them to join us or anything. Once they were free, I would prefer that they went back to the Lineage of the White Wolf.

“There he goes being a softy again,” Ketty said.

“We ought to learn when the auction is being held,” Lionel commented.

“Right,” I said.

“You’re awfully nice sometimes, sir.”

“Only when it benefits me.”

Everyone gave a wry smile at that comment.

Kefin and my master returned a short while later.

“The labyrinth is to the north,” Kefin reported. “Should be about half a day in our carriage.”

According to him, there were several villages on the way, as well as facilities for adventuring parties to lodge in large groups.

“We could be there by nightfall if we left now,” Brod said. “But they don’t call it the Labyrinth of Wiles for nothing. The place is filled with traps, and it could take a good while before we clear it.”

“Has it been cleared before?” I asked.

“Apparently, but dunno for sure. Parties can have their spirits broken easy by getting sent to the beginning right at the end, monsters can put ’em out of

commission... It's a nasty dungeon."

"Then it's probably best that we stock up on food first. There's a place I want to check out anyway."

"Where's that?" he asked. "Before you ask, I don't know if I can get you into HQ."

I laughed. "That does interest me, but I'm thinking of going to a slave auction."

Brod gave me a look. "Luciel..."

"Hey, hear me out first. There's a pair of sisters the Lineage of the White Wolf trained, and they're being put up for sale."

"Shoulda figured you were in it to help someone. Well, I'm just here to see how my apprentice is holdin' up and to beat some extra training into him. Do what you gotta do." He looked away unconvincingly.

"Yes, sir."

With that settled, I walked over to the adventurers we had overheard.

"Excuse me, can you tell me more about that auction you were talking about?" I asked them bluntly. "I'll heal those wounds for your trouble too."

Having Brod and Lionel behind me probably did more to convince them than my business smile. Either way, we succeeded in getting the details, and I healed them as promised, earning me yet another astonished crowd. Apparently, the healers in Grandol were extremely ineffective, and anyone with common sense knew that they'd get more of their money's worth with a potion from the Doctor's Guild.

I decided to show them how a *real* healer operated and started to heal others, overexaggerated cheers rising up every time I cast a spell. Brod looked like a light bulb had gone off in his head when he left for the reception desk, saying he was going to "get things settled." In his absence, the situation deteriorated with another surge of patients, though most were too amazed to interfere with my work, and they began to point me to even more people who needed attention.

I hoped that my service would help improve the image of healers a little bit more. And I knew that I probably had my master to thank for the opportunity.

02 — The Slaver and the Adventurer Sisters

We got our hands on quite a bit of helpful information pertaining to the labyrinth, the sisters, and Grandol as a whole, mostly on account of Brod telling the adventurers that they could cover their healing fees with intel. Thanks to that, we were on our way straight to the shop where we had heard the sisters were being held.

Only Lionel, Estia, and I would go inside, so as not to make a scene, while the others went to look more into the other bits of information we'd obtained.

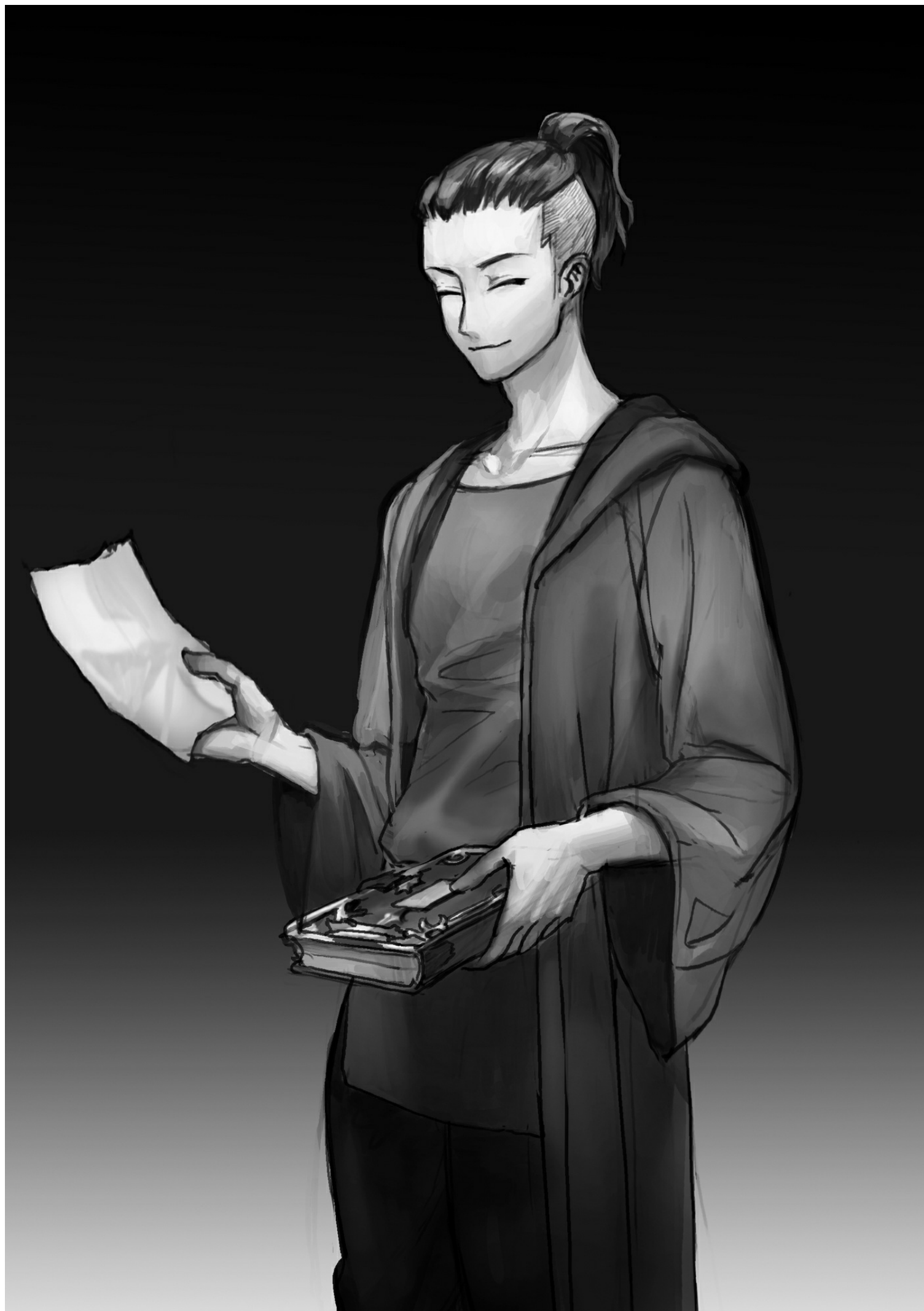
"Guess you can never be too careful," I said.

"Right you are," Ketty agreed.

"I want to investigate the labyrinth a little more," Kefin said.

I nodded. "Master, keep an eye on them."

I stepped into the stop, where a young man was waiting inside to greet us.



“Welcome,” he said. “Oh my, it’s been some time since we’ve had the pleasure of doing business with a healer.”

The way he spoke somehow rubbed me the wrong way. It was refined, like a steward or attendant, not at all like a slaver.

“You know I’m a healer?” I asked.

“You give off a very distinct...impression. It reminds me of some loyal patrons of mine from a few years past.”

“I see...”

I thought it might have been my robe, but something told me there was more to it. It would probably be prudent to look into who these other healer “patrons” were at some point too. Not that I wanted to go sticking my neck out, but I had to report to Her Holiness at some point anyway.

“What are you in the market for?” the man asked.

“I heard rumors about a pair of adventuring sisters, actually,” I replied. “They were supposedly enslaved on the basis of having committed crimes.”

“Word does indeed travel fast. But I’m afraid we intend to present them for auction tonight.”

Everything matched with our intel so far. The sisters were being treated as particularly high value. But I’d heard that it was rare for simple debt slaves to be put up for auction, so just what sort of crime had those two committed?

“Who’s allowed in?”

“Anyone with coin,” he answered, “although we do ask that all participants put down one platinum piece as proof of interest.”

Another point to Monsieur Luck. We’d made it just in time.

“I think I’ll join in. But first—pardon me if this is too forward—I’d like to speak with the two ahead of time.”

I produced a gold coin to sweeten the deal. I couldn’t just ignore them when they were supposedly friends of the Lineage of the White Wolf, although on a more personal level, part of me was wishing that one of them would

conveniently be the mystic the dragon had asked me to find.

The man hummed in thought. "Very well. I do ask that you keep the current state of the merchandise confidential, though."

Easier than expected. At least I'd get to see them now, but whatever he had meant by their "current state," I had a feeling it wasn't good.

"All right. I swear to not speak a word of it until after the auction. Would you rather we made that a contract?"

"That won't be necessary. Now, if you'll follow me."

"Stay on guard," I muttered to Lionel. "Also..."

"Yes, sir. I remember," he replied. He was to keep watch for anyone strong who caught his eye. I wasn't about to turn down any potential asset, especially if they turned out to be as strong as he or Ketty had.

As we followed the man, we passed by a few other staff members. Further ahead, we saw the slaves, and in any other context I would have said they were living in luxury. The staff were thin and exhausted while the slaves sipped expensive-looking tea in their cells. It reminded me almost of a pet shop, except instead of cats and dogs, they were men and women. It wasn't squalor, that was for sure, but it was certainly twisted in its own way.

I ignored the creeping discomfort inside me and focused on the man in front of us. Based on the workers' attitudes towards him, I figured he was the one in charge, which made something else all the more confusing. Why had he agreed to show me to the sisters for a single gold coin? Was there something about them that would ensure he'd make the sale at the auction? Or was there nothing in particular that would affect their value one way or another?

"There's no need to be so suspicious," the man said. "I know how to make a profit."

"Of that I'm certain," I replied.

This was nothing like what I'd seen in Yenice. The interior was neat, spacious, and even decorated, but for all its splendor, I started to see differences in how each slave was treated. Be it in the size of their cell, the kinds of decorations, or

their clothes. Even their meals were probably ever so slightly varied in quality. And it all seemed intentionally crafted to boost the value of his products. It was the expert mercantilism to Dhoran's master craftsmanship. I couldn't help but wonder what a man of his talents was doing selling slaves.

The farther in we went, the lower the people's quality of life became, and every cell that wasn't the sisters made me more curious. By the sound of it, the sisters were supposed to be one of the hottest items at the auction. They were going to draw a crowd. So when we finally reached them, in the cell at the very back, I was speechless. I understood at once why the man had made me swear to keep their condition a secret.

Stab wounds replaced their eyes, their ears were bloodied stumps, blisters covered their faces, their hair was entirely gone, their arms had become chipped hunks of stone, and necrosis due to some kind of poison had rotted their legs. I honestly had no idea how they were even still alive.

It took everything I had to keep from casting Extra Heal right then and there. I had seen plenty of slaves in similar conditions, so I hadn't thought something like this could still shake me. Estia, too, was crying and shaking, her hands covering her mouth. And then I realized why the two of us were so broken up over complete strangers: one of them was probably a mystic.

"They were a beautiful pair not so long ago," the slaver said in an unconcerned voice. "Poor things were betrayed by their party, and during their escape, they triggered a trap and fell right into a hydra's lair. Despite surviving even that, in their fatigue they were captured by bandits disguised as fellow adventurers."

"Wouldn't that make them illegally enslaved?" I asked.

"Ah, had they not slain a group of adventurers upon leaving the dungeon. An unfortunate accident, really. The adventurers were only trying to help, and they had bright futures ahead of them."

They had probably taken the sisters by surprise, as the girls had presumably been blinded by then. It really was unfortunate. The real criminals here were the brutes who had sold the two for a quick buck. I had to remember to ask Brod to look into this incident more after the auction.

“That is unfortunate,” I agreed.

“It’s hard to blame them, though. Just look at them. I doubt they knew what they were doing. The bandits brought them to me like this, you see, and they were utterly unrecognizable. I only realized they were women later.”

Why were they in such a sorry state if they were already exhausted enough to be captured? And the man himself wasn’t free from suspicion for buying them in the first place.

“Can they even speak?” I asked.

“Doubtful,” he replied. “I’m hardly certain they still breathe. Do keep in mind, however, that all purchases are final.”

That came as little surprise. Their throats were horribly scarred. I could make out the traces of healing, but whoever had done it had done so only to keep them from perishing.

“You can keep the money. Tell me, how do you plan on selling these two at an auction?”

“There are many people in this world. Some with peculiar tastes. And I do not judge.”

It felt like the slaver was peering through me for some reason. I didn’t like it.

“How can I attend?”

“Oh? You aren’t deterred?” His poker face wavered. “I see you’re one such individual.”

“They were on good terms with an adventuring party I’m friends with,” I said. “I’d like them to at least spend the rest of their lives in peace.”

“Completely understandable. Let me write you a letter of invitation.”

“Please do. And I still want to have a word with them. Just in case.”

“Of course. Find me when you’re finished.” He peered at me with discerning eyes. He had surely made me out as just another freaky customer.

“You’re putting a lot of trust in me, leaving me here alone,” I said.

“It’s not you I trust. It’s myself. And...” He trailed off, then flashed an

unsettling grin. “Never mind. Forget I said anything. I’ll be waiting at the door.”

The man left the room. For a slaver, he seemed to pride himself on being a good judge of character. Lionel told me that we were still being watched, however.

I turned to the sisters. “My name is Luciel,” I said to them. “Chosen of the dragons and spirits. Do either of you have their blessings too?”

There was no reply. They were simply stiff with fear, unresponsive to anything.

“It’s likely their hearing has gone as well,” Lionel said.

He was right. All we’d accomplish by being here was to frighten them. Estia would have turned to the spirit if Lionel weren’t here, but the fact that I could feel something told me that the spirit magic user wasn’t *just* an arcanist. It was possible that she was blessed.

I thought for a moment, then turned to Estia. “You’re an arcanist, right? Can you communicate with them through the spirits? Give it a try, but no pressure.” I shifted my attention to Lionel, praying for her success. “Did you see anyone worth our time?”

“I did. Two, in fact,” he replied.

“Then we’ll talk with them before we leave. We could use them.”

“We already are, sir. It’s the sisters.”

I looked at their emaciated forms. “You don’t have to pull any punches, you know?”

“The older strikes me as a practiced swordswoman, and the younger’s ability to wield the spirits speaks for itself,” he explained.

“Well, I’m not *that* hungry for more power. I’d rather they put those skills to use in Yenice.”

“I might have expected you’d say that.”

He could think I was soft, but Yenice needed as much help as they could get. I considered this an investment.

“That’s assuming we can actually win the auction,” I added.

“Should we not, it will simply be as it was meant to be.”

Sometimes I was jealous of Lionel’s decisiveness. I was pretty wishy-washy in comparison.

“Fair point. Once this is all done, we’ll have to start preparing for the labyrinth. Should be busy.”

Our conversation came to a lull, and I saw Estia shuffle from the corner of my eye. “Any luck?” I asked her.

“Only with the younger one, sir,” she answered. “She asked me if we could purchase her along with her sister.”

Good. There was our point of contact. They were in horrible shape, and their wounds were egregious, but those with blessings wouldn’t go out so easily. I wanted to heal them right that second, but I clenched my fists and endured it. I couldn’t yet.

“Got it. Tell them to hang in there until the auction.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lionel raised an eyebrow at Estia as she communicated through the spirits. He must have been getting a whiff of the Spirit of Dusk’s strength. When Estia finished, she staggered for a moment, then dropped to her knees.

“Have you...run out of magic?” Lionel asked suspiciously.

“Sorry,” Estia replied. “I’m not used to doing that, so I’m a little worn out.”

“Sir, I believe Estia would make a better asset if she were properly trained.”

“You think that about everyone,” I quipped. “Sorry for pushing you, Estia.”

“I’m glad to be helpful,” she said.

Come to think of it, a telepathy skill would have been really handy. I wondered if we all might be able to learn it for ourselves. Or maybe Pola could make a magic item to substitute for it, seeing as she could make arclink crystals.

“Hang in there,” I murmured to the sisters as we left. “Just a bit longer.”

An attendant at the door opened it for us.

“Ah. Finished already?” the slaver asked.

“We couldn’t exactly have much of a conversation,” I said.

“Really? I thought you might have been able to heal their wounds quite nicely.”

So *that* was his aim. Was he trying to bait me into getting angry? Or did he know more than he was letting on and just toying with me for fun? Or maybe...he was in possession of a certain skill.

“Healing magic has limits.”

The man sighed. “I should have expected that. I’ve been turned away from every healer I go to, you know. And they would fetch such a price if only something could be done for them.”

“Not even High Heal can restore eyes or dismembered limbs,” I said.

If I healed them now, their price would shoot up at the auction, and I might miss my chance to buy them. I also wanted to play my cards close while this man’s true motives remained a mystery.

“Here, this is yours.” He handed me a letter of invitation. “We will begin at eight in the afternoon. Behind the Merchant’s Guild.”

He took out a map and carefully explained how to get there. As I listened, I found myself wondering yet again why a man so skilled at business was working in the slave industry.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll be sure to bid on anything that catches my eye.”

“We appreciate your patronage.”

The man watched us as we exited his shop.

Brod and the others were waiting for us outside.

“That was fast,” my master said. “How’d it go?”

“The auction’s happening tonight,” I replied. “I’ll be attending, so we’ll worry about the labyrinth tomorrow.”

“What’s the plan for now?”

“Let’s get to an inn first, then everyone’s free to do what they want. I’m guessing you probably have business at the guild.”

“Yeah, I’ve gotta head to HQ,” he said. “Gotta report in about that mine that up and vanished. And figure out why the geniuses never contacted us at Merratoni when things went to hell.”

Brod definitely wasn’t happy. I already felt bad for those poor guild staff who were going to end up hearing his spiel.

“All right, then. Let’s go find a good inn and get settled.”

“The adventurers already gave me a recommendation,” Kefin said. “I’ll lead us there.”

“Good work.”

Thanks to Kefin’s masterful forethought, we found ourselves a place to stay. Brod left for the Adventurer’s Guild soon after. In the meantime, until the auction, Ketty and Kefin recounted the information they’d gathered about the Labyrinth of Wiles, and we hammered out a plan of action.

03 — The Auction

When the sun finally set, the town of adventurers was alight with the glowing wings of fluttering butterflies. At the same time, the people began to glow as well. With the glint of copper, silver, and gold coins.

Lionel and I were walking down the street.

“Ketty and Kefin weren’t very happy about us going alone,” I commented.

“Because they could smell the trouble you’re brewing from a mile away.”

He grinned at me, and it made my stomach cramp. Since when had I become the troublemaker?

“Speak up if you see anything we should get aside from the sisters while we’re there,” I told him. “Maybe we can get someone a nice souvenir.”

“I believe we’ll have plenty of chaos to bring back with us.”

“Please don’t say that,” I groaned. Lionel cackled.

Following the map, we circled around the guildhall and came to the location of the auction. They let us in with only a slight glance at our invitation letter and without even a body check. Apparently, the sponsor would bear all responsibility for their invited parties, but the reward of a commission for any purchases outweighed the risk. It was the same as Yenice’s system.

According to one of the guards, today’s items were particularly diverse. There would not only be slaves, but weapons, decorative trinkets, tools, ownership deeds, and more.

“No one’s hiding their faces, but everyone’s got bodyguards,” I said. “Yeah, no way this could go wrong.”

“Indeed,” Lionel agreed. “They even neglected to take our weapons.”

“Could be a fight.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Why do you look excited about it?”

Lionel seemed ready to start trading blows, but I focused on the auction. We could really use someone with a bit more brains or a cute pet for my mental well-being.

When we took our seats, I scanned the area and noted the potential exits. More people continued to trickle through them until a man in a mask took the stage and they were sealed off. He looked around at the audience.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us. We have thirty items available for auction tonight, and we greatly look forward to the participation of our esteemed guests. Let us begin right away with item number one: this flame sword. It was retrieved from a labyrinth right here in Grandol, and with a little magic flare, this fiery blade will surely turn your enemies to ash.”

“Got one already,” I murmured.

“I expect the bidding will be fierce,” Lionel commented.

He was right. The sword ultimately sold for seventeen gold coins. And if that plain old weapon could go for that much, I didn’t want to think about how competitive the other items would be. Eventually, something caught my eye.

“Item number five is a spirit robe with high magic resistance and self-repairing qualities, procured from a young adventurer.”

“Guess I’m bidding now,” I said.

“On that? It doesn’t appear to be a fake, but do we have a use for it?” Lionel asked.

“If your favorite cloak or armor was put up for auction, would we have any use for it?”

“I would prefer that we bid on it,” he admitted.

“Exactly. That probably belongs to the younger sister. And if it doesn’t, no harm done.”

“Counting our chickens before they’ve hatched, are we?”

“You can make fun of me if I mess this up.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Next came a spirit amulet, pegasus boots, a spirit staff, a dragon chestplate, dragon gauntlets, dragon boots, and a dragon robe. I won every last bid.

“Wow, I’m getting some nasty looks,” I noted.

“You’ve spent nearly ten platinum in a short time. Quite the display,” Lionel replied with anticipation in his voice. Maybe I should have kept a low profile and stuck with just the sisters.

“We’re leaving tomorrow anyway. It’ll work out.”

“A fine way to think about it and a good attitude to have when the Whirlwind and I subject you to our training regimen.”

Since when did they have the time to put together something like that?

“On second thought, maybe I’ll buy the whole place out.”

“That’s fine too.”

However, there were no more weapons to bid on after that. The next items were land or building ownership deeds and such, and when the other participants realized I had no interest in any of them, the bidding turned competitive once more.

“I wasn’t breaking any rules, was I?” I wondered out loud.

“You started the bidding awfully high, sir.”

“It’s all about psychological warfare.”

After the deeds had all been sold, the slave auction followed.

“And now, what you’ve all been waiting for,” said the host. “Item number twenty-three is a dragonewt by the name of Algred, found guilty of damage to private property and the murder of a sentry on duty, who he killed with his bare hands. So you can be assured of his strength.”

“No thanks,” I said. The man’s eyes were bloodshot and his nostrils were flared.

“I thought not,” said Lionel.

The slaves who followed were not of the sympathetic variety, nor were there any children. I ended up refraining from bidding on any of them.

“No one stands out to me,” I murmured.

“I’ve seen no one with any worthwhile potential so far either.”

Soon, the moment we were waiting for arrived.

“I’m now pleased to present to you all items twenty-nine and thirty,” the host announced. “A handsomely beautiful swordstress with unmatched talent who disguised herself as a man, became an adventurer, and quickly rose through the ranks. And her young sister, an arcanist who could not bear to be without her.”

They were in the exact same condition I had seen them in earlier. The guests, many of whom had been waiting patiently for just this moment, were not happy, and some began to throw things at the stage.

“Now, now, everyone settle down!” the host shouted over the crowd. “These poor souls were betrayed by their fellow party members, who very nearly had their way with them, but the sisters managed to flee by using the dungeon’s traps to their advantage. Unfortunately, they were transported to the den of a monster, and what was waiting for them was none other than the man-eating, multi-headed serpent known as a hydra!”

“You ever fought a hydra?” I asked Lionel.

“No. But I would win,” he answered.

“Hm.”

“And so the men found their quarry only to be devoured by the beast,” the host continued. “The hapless pair escaped with their lives yet again, but only just. Poisoned, their beauty forever marred, their legs blackened, and their eyes gouged out, they met with yet more misfortune when arrows loosed by bandits masquerading as adventurers buried themselves in their throats. And though they still breathe thanks to the brilliance of alchemy, through which we concoct our healing potions, they will never speak another word.”

As I listened, the story started to seem stranger and stranger.

“This really doesn’t sound plausible without some kind of organized group

behind it,” I said. “And the slaver might be in on it.”

“Something caught your attention?” Lionel asked.

“Yeah. He has too many details, and based on the story, the people who sold those two were objectively criminals. Plus, why would a slave shop of that caliber buy a pair of sisters in such terrible shape in the first place? It doesn’t add up.”

“It certainly doesn’t. But a man like that doesn’t often leave tracks. I fear your suspicion of the slaver’s involvement may lack the hard evidence needed to base any charges you might levy against him.”

“Right.”

The host’s tale went on. “Undoubtedly, the fiends intended to kidnap a pair of gorgeous damsels, but when they saw their ruined visages, scarred by the hydra, they severed their ears and what remained of their eyes in anger, pilfering their weapons and other items. But still they struggled! And yet, alas, in the process they slew a young group of new adventurers who had come to their aid, entirely by mistake.”

“How could there be a company of bandits without a price on their head in a country of adventurers?” I mused. “Unless they were failed adventurers themselves.”

“I do enjoy a good bandit raid,” Lionel said.

“People are for healing, not slaying.”

“Sometimes the best cure is simply offering them a new chance at life.”

“I mean, you’ve got the right spirit, I guess?”

The host was doing a horrible job of selling his merchandise. But then what was the point of bringing them here in the first place? Was I overthinking it?

“Those of you with the resources to restore these unfortunate young women, you may very well find yourself with two of the most beautiful flowers in the world,” the host continued. The crowd collectively breathed a sigh of disappointment. They knew it was just business talk. No one could regenerate eyes, vocal cords, or limbs. “Shall we begin the bidding at ten gold for the pair

of them?”

The price slowly jumped to twenty, then thirty, but no more. The audience was dead. Everything was silent until I shouted, “One platinum!”

An even deeper silence fell as the masked man bowed to me, and then I recognized him. It was the slaver himself.

“Did you notice too?” I asked Lionel.

“Only just now,” he replied. “I pegged him for a shrewd businessman, but I saw none of that quality in him here.”

“He might be up to something. If I wasn’t so suspicious of him, I’d say we could really use someone with his brains on our side.”

He was definitely after something. You didn’t get to be as good as him without a goal. And if slaving was the profession he had chosen, then the things he needed most of all were money and people. Jord and the way he supported me came to mind.

“Merchants follow the money. What distinguishes them is simply how far their morals allow them to chase that desire,” Lionel said.

“We’d all live in a better world if morals drove everything. He’s working towards something, but what’s important is where his own morals draw the line.”

“The plot thickens.”

“I hope not.”

We grinned at each other, and the host called an end to the bidding.

“Thank you all for joining us tonight,” he said in closing. “May we all meet again.” He bowed as the curtain fell.

My purchase of the sisters had clearly cemented everyone’s impression of me as some stupid nouveau riche with loose purse strings, and they immediately lost all interest in me. On one hand, that was great. On the other, they all thought I was an idiot.

Lionel and I made our way over to retrieve our items and the girls. A clerk was

supposed to take us to our purchases and collect our money.

“You have many items waiting for you, Sir Healer,” the man said. “This way, please.” He guided us to a private room for some reason, and then I realized it was the host, no longer masked. The slaver. “Your belongings were moved here for safekeeping. Your total for all eight comes to...”

I placed eleven platinum on the table. “This includes the sisters, so all *ten*. Keep the change.”

“Thank you kindly. I’ll return with them shortly.”

“I’ll join you,” I said firmly, touching the items and stowing them in my magic bag.

“If you insist. This way,” he said. I thought I saw his face twitch uncomfortably for a split second. He probably hadn’t been expecting me to have such an item.

He took us to a room with a cell with the sisters locked inside it alone with numerous other slaves. Their conditions were not good. They weren’t being groped, beaten, or abused, but their mental anguish was clear.

“This is awful,” I said.

“We run a business,” the slaver replied.

“Save it. Now, can you bring them to me?”

“One moment, sir.”

The man said something to one of the guards, who then reached inside the cage and forcefully dragged the two girls out to me.

“What the hell are you doing?!” I yelled. “Those two are with me!” Lionel had to grab my shoulder to hold me back.

“Ah, so you prefer to be gentle with your property,” the man said tauntingly.

“You heard me tell you they’re acquaintances of my friends.”

“A thousand apologies, sir,” he replied, unamused by my lack of reaction. “Let us transfer their pacts to you. May I have a drop of blood?”

I was clenching my fists so tightly that the nails had already broken the skin. A droplet fell easily.

“They’re yours now,” the slaver said.

At once, I took a robe from my bag, threw it over the girls, and picked them up. My high level gave me the strength to do so with relative ease.

“We’re leaving,” I told Lionel.

“Yes, sir.”

Both his hands were now free in case of attack. When we left the auction venue, everyone was waiting for us.

“What’s this about?” I asked.

“Robberies happen a lot after auctions. Thought I’d come by just in case, but the others wanted to join me,” Brod explained.

“Thanks.”

I appreciated his concern, but I felt like if there was a secret society of muggers who specifically targeted auction-goers, there would’ve been far fewer auctions.

“They good?” Brod asked.

“I’m keeping them stable with Heal right now and was planning to take them to the inn first, but we’re probably safe with everyone here.” I cast Recover, Dispel, and Purification all at once.

“Sir, you just freed them,” Kefin said in surprise. “So quickly?”

Lionel was grinning.

“Not out of pity, mind you,” I said. “I’m not letting my sympathy get the better of me this time. Lionel, you were about to suggest the same thing, weren’t you?”

“I was,” he affirmed. “That man is hiding something, and I sensed something wrong during the pact creation. What you did was wise. We were being watched intently.”

He had said the same thing back at the shop. Had the slaver been appraising me? Searching me for something? I wasn’t sure what he hoped to find, but what worried me was *why* he was looking.

“Anyway, let’s get to the inn so we can heal them properly,” I said.

I tried to hand the sisters over to Ketty and Kefin, but despite their lack of senses, they didn’t seem willing to let go of me.

“Doesn’t look like they’re moving,” Ketty remarked.

“We believe in you, sir,” said Kefin.

Apparently, I was the mule tonight.

04 — More Than Duty

I felt many unpleasant gazes on us on our way back, but we returned to the inn unscathed, largely owing to Brod and Lionel's intimidating auras...although it did scare the sisters the whole time.

"We arrived safely," Lionel said.

"They weren't pushovers, though," Brod noted. "Coulda just been following us to figure out where we're staying so they can get ready for a more organized attack."

"They trailed us like amateurs, and no assassins were lying in wait, so we can handle whatever they decide to throw our way."

He was right. Honestly, the aggressors were the lucky ones for not attacking.

"Well, we're leaving tomorrow, so not like it matters," I said. We carried the sisters to Ketty and Estia's room and lay them down. I stepped back. "I'm going to heal them. Be ready in case they panic."

Everyone nodded, and I cast Extra Heal on them both at once. I considered using the Spirit of Dusk, but I didn't want to wear her or Estia out.

The sisters glowed as their ears, legs, and various other body parts were restored. My master watched in awe.

"You get crazier and crazier by the moment," he said. "You could train till you drop every day with that kind of magic. If you did, you could be as good as me in just five years."

"His low level leaves much room for growth," Lionel added. "Given time and practice in a few labyrinths, he could become a formidable warrior even without an innate talent for it."

"You think so too, huh?"

"Indeed."

I'm right here, guys!

I finished healing and addressed the sisters. “My name is Luciel, Shurulian healer. As you may have noticed, your wounds and afflictions have been taken care of. You can check yourselves to make sure nothing’s out of place.”

They slowly blinked their eyes open, revealing astonishment at the fact that they even had eyes to begin with. Confusion and hesitation followed in their expressions, but joy won out in the end. They looked at each other, saw that they were both alive, and embraced.



Unfortunately, there wasn't enough time to allow for a heartfelt reunion.

"I need you both to listen," I said. "Are the two of you chosen by the dragons and spirits? I've been blessed by a few of them myself, and I'm supposed to find the Sworn."

They let go of each other and exchanged looks. Then they turned to me and nodded.

"I am the sworn mystic of the Draconis, Nadia the swordstress. You have my thanks for rescuing my sister and me."

"I am the sworn mystic of the Elemental, Lydia the arcanist. You have my thanks as well for healing our wounds."

Well, that was that. Thank goodness we had found them so quickly. Strangely, I didn't feel the same stirring of emotion I had felt when I'd seen them locked in the cell at the slave shop. Had that only been a response to their critical condition? And even stranger, I had almost felt like I recognized them before, but now that their faces were restored, I couldn't really say.

Was it our connection? Did the fact that we were fated to meet make me sensitive to their situation? That would definitely fit the whole "fated" part, at least. But it also felt like jumping the shark to up and start traveling together just because some people called it "destiny."

Those dragons and spirits never did get how we mortals worked. Yeah, this was *their* fault. That made me a little more confident.

"So, you're the Sworn," I said with a sigh. "I probably should have led with this, but for the record, I saved you because I heard you know the Lineage of the White Wolf."

"Bazan's party?" Nadia replied.

"Did they make it to Yenice?" Lydia asked.

Both of their faces lit up. They were indeed students of my friends.

"I only heard rumors, because I'd already finished my term by the time I learned about them," I said. "We just missed each other."

“Does that mean you’re *the* Luciel?!” Lydia exclaimed. “The S-rank healer?!”

The older sister widened her eyes.

“That’s me. And on your right is the guildmaster of the Merratoni Adventurer’s Guild.”

“The Whirlwind?!”

“Didn’t know kids these days still used that name,” Brod said bashfully, his arms crossed, eyes averted.

“Anyway, that’s why I helped you,” I explained. “I know you were enslaved for crimes, but I’m also aware that you must have been set up. As of now, you’re free.”

“Wait, enslaved?”

“Crimes?” Nadia repeated.

It was clear they didn’t fully understand everything that had happened to them, so I asked for their version of the story.

“Lydia and I are a two-person party, but we needed more manpower and skill for the traps and monsters in the Labyrinth of Wiles,” Nadia told me. “We teamed up with another group, but then things got complicated. We managed to get away, but we ran straight into a hydra. Once we got out of that, we finally made it out of the labyrinth, where a band of thugs dressed as adventurers was waiting for us. They captured us, we lost our eyes and ears, and that’s about all we know.”

“Allow me to fill in the blanks,” I said. “After the ones who attacked you stabbed out your eyes and cut off your ears, you apparently took out a group of newbie adventurers. Then you were brought to a slaver and put up for auction tonight, which is where I bought you. We brought you to this inn, I healed you, and that brings us to now.”

I hesitated over whether to tell them about the murders but ultimately decided to be honest. When they heard the truth, they looked down, hiding their expressions. They were quiet for a while before thanking me once more.

“What do we do now?” Nadia asked. “You may have freed us from bondage,

but we still owe our lives to you.”

“I needed to remove any curses that might have been put on you, so one way or another, you’d have been freed,” I explained. “You owe me nothing. What do *you* want to do?”

“What do *we* want to do?”

“Will you join me and my organization? Or would you prefer to go back to adventuring? It’s up to you. I don’t intend to force you to do anything.”

Nadia looked at her younger sister. Lydia nodded. Were the spirits feeding her information on the situation like some kind of incorporeal lie detector? It’d be handy if Estia could do the same thing.

Nadia turned back to me. “I want to ask for your help.” She and her sister lowered their heads.

“With what?” I asked.

“Freeing the Eternal Dragons,” she answered.

“Our promise to the spirits compels us to ask that we journey with you,” Lydia added.

I was taken aback for a moment, but their request wasn’t so far-fetched. Unlike me, they were connected directly to the Draconis and the Elemental. All the more reason for me to draw a line in the sand.

“You want me to attain all the blessings,” I said. “I’ll be honest, I don’t want to get anywhere near that whole situation.”

The sisters went silent, unsure of how to respond. My master, meanwhile, barely contained his laughter. There was an argument to be made that I already *was* involved, but the only reason I hadn’t been crushed under the weight of it was because I had people to support me. And for their sakes, I couldn’t agree to making the sisters’ duty my own responsibility.

After a while, Nadia finally said, “Then can we still travel with you? At least for a time. Until we decide our next move.”

Now she was speaking my language. “Be my guest.”

The two thanked me again as I moved to the table to prepare some meals.

“You can go ahead and use this room. I’ll leave some food here for now and be back tomorrow morning.”

They bowed, and then I exited the room.

“Sorry for displacing you two,” I told Ketty and Estia.

“Eh,” Ketty replied simply. “So, what’s your plan?”

“The first order of business is to try and get in contact with the Lineage of the White Wolf. There’s a high chance the sisters will get sick of traveling with us and leave on their own.”

“That could be fun.”

“Sir, you look pale,” Estia said. “You should get some rest.”

“She’s right. You go take a nap while the rest of us keep watch,” Ketty suggested.

Thankful for their consideration, I returned to my room with Brod and Lionel, where we talked about tomorrow’s plans.

“The goal of going to the Labyrinth of Wiles was to rescue the mystic,” I said. “Now that we’ve done that, I see little reason to go out of our way. Master, you could go back to Merratoni tomorrow if you want.”

Brod wasn’t obligated to stick around, after all. And he was surely busy, being a guildmaster and all.

“All that’s waiting for me back there is a mountain of paperwork,” he growled. “And then I’ll hafta let off steam somehow, right? So I’d wind up using the training grounds, and then HQ’ll be up my ass about hogging the facilities, blah blah.”

“Okay, so basically, you don’t want to leave.” No one in Merratoni was ballsy enough to entertain him, that was for sure.

“You don’t like paperwork either, do you?”

“Compared to *your* idea of fun?” I said. “Never mind. How long are you

thinking about staying?”

“Say...at least as long as it takes to wrap things up on my end.”

“So, about a month?”

“Pretty much,” he said. “That’ll be plenty o’ time for us to run the gauntlet on every labyrinth in Grandol. *Including* the Labyrinth of Wiles.”

“I would like that,” Lionel chimed in.

No one asked you, I thought. But I was powerless to stop either of them. My one saving grace was that not every labyrinth was a dragon slumber party, so I decided not to fight it.

Somehow, I was excited. We were about to have a good old-fashioned training session. Of course, I knew once the training actually started I’d be much less enthusiastic, but still. Maybe I was asking too much by hoping we could’ve done this back in the Merratoni Adventurer’s Guild.

“I’ll stock up on food tomorrow morning, so work out which labyrinths we’ll go to in the meantime,” I said.

Brod smirked. “Lookin’ forward to getting some good sparring matches in. And to seein’ how you’ll grow.”

“Will there be any problem with having Nadia and Lydia join us?”

“Not unless you’ve got one. But listen, I want you to stay sharp.”

“You mean we should keep an eye on those two?” I asked.

“That too, but I mean that dragon and spirit stuff. Don’t get too caught up in what you *should* be doing. Duty has a way of making you lose sight of what’s important.”

His voice was serious.

“I’ll bear it in mind.”

“Good. And hey, if duty’s got them in a bind, maybe you can do something to help ’em.” He glanced to the side. “The hell you smilin’ at?”

“I simply find the sight of you as a master amusing,” Lionel sneered.

“Shut up and go to your room,” Brod shot back. “I should too. We got an early morning tomorrow.”

“Then if you’ll excuse me, Mister Luciel.”

“Goodnight, you two,” I said.

They smiled at me and left the room.

“What is it they want from me, I wonder? Master sure knows how to see through me,” I muttered to myself. “Duty...”

Maybe I was overreaching. Trying to do things beyond the bounds of my own abilities.

Moments before hopping into bed, I remembered that I’d forgotten to give the sisters their items. But that could wait until tomorrow. I laid my head down on the angel’s pillow, thoughts of training occupying my mind as sleep took me, although I would have preferred thoughts of a nice, leisurely day of tourism for once.

05 — Relegation

I was awake before the sun was even up. The first thing I did was go to the sisters' room. There, I found Ketty and Kefin keeping watch from afar.

"Morning. What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Morning," Ketty replied. "You're always up early, huh?"

"Good morning, sir," Kefin greeted me. "We were staying on guard, just in case."

I didn't think the girls would disappear overnight, but even if they did, I wasn't planning on pursuing them. I had completely neglected the possibility of an assault while we were sleeping, though. Kefin was really shaping up to be a great asset, partly due to his proximity to Ketty, no doubt.

"Thanks for the sound judgment," I said. "I came to give them their equipment since I forgot last night."

"Sir, if I can be honest, I'm not sure how I feel about letting them come with us," said Kefin. "I know I'm not one to talk, being a slave and having assaulted you before, but traveling with foreign nobles is liable to get us into trouble."

"I'm aware. They were students of an adventuring party I'm friends with, though, and there's the matter of their blessings. But you're unsure?"

"I know they're special," he admitted. "But still..."

I greatly respected his ability to offer his opinion, however reluctantly, and provide a different outlook on the situation. It spoke to his sincerity. Kefin struck me as the personification of the "retainer" role, and the fact that I had such a man's loyalty made me glad about everything I had done in Yenice. I decided he deserved an honest reply.

"You all seem to understand why I freed them, but I see why you might not be convinced about them joining us. I think the reason I'm going this far has something to do with...the privilege my blessings have afforded me."

“Privilege?”

“Yeah. I’m no one special. Just an average person with a bit of a knack for healing magic.”

“That’s not—”

“Just hear me out,” I interrupted him. “I’m no one special, but the spirits and dragons still gave me their blessings. And they’re the ones who have helped me make it through everything. I think.”

“You do too much of that,” Ketty quipped.

I chuckled. “Anyway, the point is, we’ve saved the Drakesworn and the Spiritsworn, and with that, I want to think that I’ve repaid some of my debt.”

That was the truth. Yeah, the prospect of having new companions was exciting, and the idea of a soulmate had made my heart flutter a few times, but when I got right down to it, I was just an average person. As far as I was concerned, my encounters with the dragons and spirits were only chance occurrences in my ongoing struggle to survive.

I wanted to repay them for their blessings and the benefits they had given me. The dragons had not only provided me with a treasure trove of items but also their very bodies, after all, and if saving those sisters made them happy, then I was satisfied.

Ketty let out a meowing, catlike cackle. “You’re so weird!”

“And awfully meticulous,” Kefin added, snickering. “But I think you’ve got the wrong idea.”

Wait, why were they laughing at me? I was waxing philosophical over here. Fine, if they wanted to tease me, what would happen if I pretended to be mad for once?

“I’m wrong, am I?” I said firmly.

The laughing stopped at once.

“Blessings can certainly be given at birth,” Kefin explained, “but they’re only *bestowed* in recognition of great feats or service.”

“Can’t speak for dragons, but when spirits hand them out, it’s so *they* can repay debts,” Ketty added.

“Wait, seriously?” Since when was that a thing?

“You didn’t know?” she asked.

They really weren’t joking. And from their attitude, this was common knowledge.

I thought back on every time I had received a blessing. With the dragons, I got them after undoing the Wicked One’s curses. I’d gotten the Spirit of Tides’s blessing after saving the vespian village. Wait, what about the Spirit of Land? Oh, right. I’d given those spirits honey.

But hold on...if all this was true, that meant the fate of the world wasn’t just being delegated to me through no fault of my own.

Suddenly, I was far too crestfallen to bother pretending to be mad anymore.

“Sir!” Kefin exclaimed as I slumped over.

“Where’d your good mood go?” Ketty asked in a fluster. “Look, I’m sorry we were bein’ catty.”

“I apologize too, sir. I shouldn’t have laughed or spoken out of turn.”

“It’s not your fault,” I told them. “There’s a reason people used to call me an ignoramus, and you’re looking at it. Remind me to find the nearest library later.”

They frowned at that, perhaps they weren’t exactly the bookish types.

Were my blessings really just proof of my deeds? I remembered being particularly happy about the Spirit of Tides’s because I’d gotten it much quicker than I usually got others. There had to be more to this whole thing that wasn’t as obvious as people made it seem. I couldn’t be *that* dumb. All I could really do was work with what I had in the moment.

“But I *would* like you to just correct me in the future instead of laughing,” I added.

“I’m sorry,” Kefin replied.

“So sorry,” said Ketty.

“Getting back to the main topic, I don’t regret saving those sisters, and I intend to give them the same support I’ve given everyone I’ve helped in the past. As long as they want it, that is.”

“That’s our chief,” Ketty remarked. “Never strict, always a philanthropist.”

“I shouldn’t have been so distrusting when I myself wouldn’t be here without your kindness,” Kefin admitted. “I’ll continue to stand by your side.”

“You don’t have to be so uptight. I consider us all friends, and I’m still human. I make mistakes, and I’m counting on you both to help me when I do.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Will do!”

I could try to act big and tough like I was some great, authoritative figure, but at the end of the day, my reach was small. And all I could do was try to protect whatever was in my grasp. That was why I acted the way I did.

I relaxed my fist, which I’d been unconsciously clenching, and knocked on the sisters’ door. Lydia could speak with the spirits, so she might have already known we were there.

No reply came.

“Still sleeping?” I wondered.

“It is early,” said Kefin.

“I can bring ’em to your room once they’re awake,” Ketty offered.

“Please d—”

Suddenly, the door opened, cutting me off. The moment they appeared, the girls were bowing.

“We’re very sorry,” they said in unison.

The three of us stood there in stunned silence.

“The spirits told me everything you were just talking about,” Lydia said.

“And I asked her to tell me,” said Nadia.

The Elemental's blessing let her sense presences *and* listen from far away? That sounded convenient. But I didn't get why they felt the need to apologize.

"Then you probably already know, but the plan is for you to try traveling with us for a while. Isn't that right?" I asked. "So I figured you'd need gear. Can I come in?"

After a moment, they stepped aside and invited me in. Ketty followed while Kefin waited outside.

"These are the items I bought with you at the auction," I said. I placed them all on the bed and they gasped in surprise.

"This must have been so expensive," Nadia said.

I wouldn't answer that, of course, mostly for my own sanity rather than out of any sense of politeness.

"I heard you were a swordswoman and arcanist duo, so I assumed they were yours."

"They are," Lydia said, clutching her staff like a child. "I thought I'd never see this again."

"Was there a..." Nadia hesitated to ask. "A...curved sword?"

A curved sword? Like a katana? Or more like a cutlass?

"Not that I saw," I answered. "I figured the whole set would be there, but nothing like that was up for auction."

"I see." She cast her eyes down.

I pulled out a nice-looking sword I'd gotten from the Thunder Dragon's chamber and handed it to her. "You can use this for now."

"Thank you."

Now that they were both in a good mood, I moved to my next order of business.

"I have something to tell you two. I healed you because I had a feeling you were the chosen and because the Eternal Dragon asked me to save you. I have no qualms about that." The two looked at me nervously. "But the healing you

both underwent was not normal. Lost body parts, including eyes and limbs, cannot normally be restored. So I need you to keep your cloaks on and your hoods low while we're in Grandol."

I had initially planned on ordering them to be much more strict about it, but considering we wouldn't be sticking around or coming back in the near future, even if they were found out, it wouldn't be too much of an issue. Still, I wanted to avoid as many complications as possible.

They agreed at once. For now, we would have to operate under the assumption that people were going to be watching us.

After a light breakfast, Kefin, Ketty, and I went out shopping while Lionel and Brod went about their own business. Brod had guildmaster duties and wanted to hear the details of Nadia and Lydia's escape from the labyrinth one more time. He was also going to look into the jobs they'd taken throughout their careers and start investigating who could have been pulling the strings in their attack.

Lionel and Estia stayed behind to guard the sisters, the latter mostly to be on alert in case any of the spirits put someone in danger to protect Lydia.

The three of us went into town. Ketty and Kefin walked the streets with a surprising amount of confidence, given it was their first time there. They knew where everything was, so we managed to strike bargains at some reputable places and get our hands on a good number of ingredients.

"I'm not used to this going so fast," I said. "The adventurers had a lot of useful info, huh?"

"We did some legwork while you were at the slave shop and auction," Kefin explained.

"The Whirlwind had a funny way of getting info," Ketty said. "Nothing like I expected from a guildmaster. Think he was trying to show us how to work like that ourselves."

So, he had been testing them. He'd surely been thinking hard about how we'd get through the labyrinths. Kefin looked pretty frustrated about something. I was curious to know what this method of Brod's had been.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that I had never given them any money to use when they were on their own.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t been paying any of you. I’ll fix that later,” I said.

“Sir, you do know that slaves aren’t given wages, right?” Kefin asked.

“You don’t really have to bother if you don’t want to,” Ketty said.

“No, you’re my companions, and I want to compensate you,” I insisted.

“Lionel is aware, so it’s not a big deal.” I did not necessarily have his consent, however.

We returned to the inn, regrouped, and were about to set out again, this time with everyone.

“Are we going to the Adventurer’s Guild?” I asked as I called Forêt Noire and the other horses out of the hermit key.

“Already did the groundwork. We’re goin’ to a labyrinth,” Brod replied.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to walk on any ground he had worked on. “Sure...”

He and Lionel were smiling in that battle-crazed way that I couldn’t fight against. What concerned me more, though, was that Forêt still wasn’t feeling well. She’d been getting worse ever since that light show with the Spirit of Dusk a while back. I regarded her for a while, and she glanced at me and nibbled my head. After I cast my cleansing magic on her, she went right back inside.

She never went into the hermit key that willingly. Whatever was ailing her, it was really making her feel bad. But Extra Heal didn’t seem to help, so it must have been psychological.

“Let’s go,” I said.

Brod and Lionel mounted their horses, while Kefin and Ketty took the driver’s seats. Estia, Nadia, Lydia, and I hopped into the carriage, and then we departed the city of Aecius.

We would be turning back sooner than expected.

06 — Ambush

As we left the city, I realized I hadn't actually asked where we were going.

I looked at the two in the driver's seat. "So, I know we're touring a few of the labyrinths, but where are we going first?"

"A small ten-floor one that seems to only spawn ant-type monsters," Kefin replied. "Not even I knew there could be dungeons that small."

"Personally, I'm sick of ants," Ketty griped. "But I can't stop Sir Lionel when he gets a certain way."

The cat-woman was clearly more uncomfortable with our destination than her partner. Not that I was itching to go myself, but I didn't have much choice in the matter either. I'd be just fine as long as no holes swallowed me up this time.

"That doesn't sound very fun," I said. "But there really is no stopping those two, so might as well make the most of it." I glanced at the criminals in question farther ahead and sighed.

Seeing rivals come together to lend their strength to me was great and all, but they had high expectations for me. I was worried I wouldn't be able to live up to them. Still, as always, I told myself there was no point in trying to do more than I realistically could. I focused on the objective before me right at that moment: enjoy the ride.

I turned to the sisters. "We just got here yesterday, but I hear you've been adventuring around Grandol for a while?"

"Three years for me," Nadia replied. "Just one for Lydia."

"When did you and the Lineage meet?"

"About two years ago. The guild suggested I study under someone if I was going to work alone."

"Yeah, I get that. So, Lydia showed up later?"

"Yes."

Kefin glanced back like he wanted to interject, but he didn't. He looked like he wanted to say that they'd only suggested it because she was a noble, or maybe that Yenice had no such system. The only people I imagined would benefit from such a practice were those who were already acquainted with high-ranking adventurers or, indeed, nobles.

"What did you do after they went to Yenice? Keep working as a duo?"

"Generally," Nadia answered. She frowned. "Though we worked in larger groups at times."

Oops. That was still a sore subject. Time for a change of topic.

"That's interesting to me," I said. "Most parties I knew when I was living in an Adventurer's Guild had at least three people. Seven or eight at most."

"You lived in an Adventurer's Guild?" Lydia asked, her tone rising in shock. Nadia's eyes widened.

I see. So one does the exclamations, the other does the expressions.

"Mister Luciel is famous for having forgone tutelage at a clinic for an apprenticeship with the Whirlwind himself," Kefin chimed in proudly.

"Shurule reveres its healers," said Lydia. "Why would you choose to go to an Adventurer's Guild?"

"I didn't like not knowing how to defend myself," I replied. "And I wouldn't be who I am today if I hadn't done it. So I don't regret it a bit."

"Oh. That's...nice." She looked down.

Nadia reached over to rub her sister's back. "I'd also like to have no regrets one day," she said.

"You have something you'd do over again?" I asked.

"When I became a mystic at my coming-of-age ceremony, my physical abilities increased dramatically. I thought I was invincible, so I registered as an adventurer. But my early career was filled with nothing but mistakes."

So, she'd been blessed at her ceremony, which meant the blessing had been earned?

“My master tells me that physical strength has to be accompanied by a strong mind,” I said. “You’ll never be able to reach your full potential when your head’s all muddled.”

“Bazan and the others said as much themselves,” Nadia murmured fondly.

“They have a lot of respect for Brod. Lydia, I have a question for you. Since you’re blessed by the Elemental, does that mean you can use the power of all the spirits?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I haven’t formed pacts with any of the greats yet, so I can only borrow from the more minor ones, but I can wield every element. You’ve heard of Lord Reinstar, I assume?”

“Of course. He’s the founding father of the Republic of Saint Shurule, after all.” I’d also met the guy, but saying that out loud wouldn’t be very smart. Then again, what kind of reaction would I get? The temptation was real.

“He’s said to have formed pacts with all the spirits and even met the Elemental,” she went on. “Meeting the Elemental is my goal too. It’s why I’m traveling with my sister.”

Despite the many things I was sure she knew, one couldn’t just form contracts with the spirits that easily. The Spirit of Dusk herself didn’t seem all that interested, and neither did Forêt, for that matter.

Nadia looked at her excited sister with a worried expression. Maybe she was conflicted and had never wanted Lydia to be an adventurer in the first place. Before I could decide whether to follow that line of questioning, I heard shouting from outside.

“Ambush!” Brod shouted.

“Prepare for battle!” Lionel yelled.

Kefin and I immediately leaped down from the carriage.

“Master!” I called out.

“Dunno who these bastards are—adventurers, slaves, or just plain old bandits—but it’s about to get ugly. You good to fight?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“Sir, my sword,” Lionel requested.

“Here.” I tossed him the flaming greatsword, feeling sorry for the poor saps who had thought it would be a good idea to jump *us*. Then I calmed my beating heart and got ready for battle. “Nadia, Lydia, you two stay in the carriage. Estia, stay with them.”

I cast Area Barrier, moved to the front of the carriage, and did the same to Ketty and Kefin, then to Estia and the sisters, just in case. I didn’t like fighting against other people. It wasn’t something I’d ever get used to.

“I won’t let anyone die,” I murmured. That was the one thing I could be certain of.

“In that case, I’d fight without hesitating, ’cause they sure won’t,” Ketty said.

“Mister Luciel doesn’t like taking life, so try and settle for dismemberment,” Kefin suggested. At least he had the right spirit.

“Fine.”

I cast Area Barrier from a distance on Brod and Lionel at the front, and a moment later, arrows started flying towards them. Dozens of them fell like rain. But the pair simply batted them away like they were having a chat in the middle of a light drizzle.

“Well, they look like they’re doing fine. Ketty, Kefin, watch our flanks,” I ordered.

They took up their positions with amused grins, and soon the frequency of the arrows diminished.

“Did they realize it wasn’t working? They must have run out of arrows fast, so guess they’ll try to close in next,” I mused.

“We’ll leave things here to you,” said Ketty.

“Time to deal with the enemies on our flanks,” Kefin added.

They disappeared at once. Apparently, the older battle-crazed lunatics ahead of us weren’t the only ones anxious to fight.

I glanced in the directions they had run off in and saw two groups (parties?) of

five on each side. But the way they watched us wasn't like the bandits at the front who Lionel and Brod were facing. Assuming those men were the ones who had disguised themselves as adventurers to attack the sisters, the groups on the sides seemed like genuine, honest-to-god adventuring parties. I could see the varying quality of their armor, and while the bandits seemed to be sadistically enjoying themselves, the adventurers appeared tense and nervous. Another thing that stood out to me was their lack of coordination.

As I ruminated, the front squad was charging towards Brod and Lionel. There was no telling what they were planning or if this was a suicide maneuver, so I got ready to heal at a moment's notice. It ended up being unnecessary. One second, Brod was on his horse. The next, he was gone, the enemy's advance had stopped, and screams filled the air. Lionel promptly dismounted and swung his sword, creating walls of fire on either side of the group and paralyzing any remaining mounts still trying to push forward.

"Yup, that's Sir Lionel," Ketty boasted. "The Whirlwind's not half bad either."

"I bet he'd train us when he isn't focusing on Mister Luciel," Kefin said. "That's something to look forward to."

They had returned from their excursions at the same time. Kefin, however, didn't know that talking about looking forward to *anything* during a battle was just *asking* for death flags. Still, he had improved quite a bit lately. Simply being motivated at all was an amazing talent in and of itself, but I sometimes saw something more in him. A craving to be stronger.

"Good work," I said. "Find anything to identify them?"

"Not much," Ketty replied. "What we know is that they were hired. Newbie adventurers."

"Same on my side," Kefin added. "They started talking before I even had a chance to make them. Seems they were told to help during a carriage raid."

I had a hunch that whoever had concocted this scheme was the same one who had tricked Nadia and Lydia. It was a good thing Ketty and Kefin were unhurt—not that I thought they would be, considering they could square up against paladins.

“What did you do with them?” I asked.

“They were ready to start runnin’ as soon as they saw the arrows,” Ketty answered. “I knocked them out and took their guild cards.”

“Likewise.”

Galba had taught them some things during our time in Yenice, and their skills were a testament to the darkness behind that beastman’s genial smile.

“Got it,” I replied. “We’ll probably head back to Aecius when Lionel and Master get here. Stay on guard until the fight’s over.”

They saluted as I left them to go peek inside the carriage.

“Either of you have any idea why someone has it in for you this bad?” I asked the sisters.

They gripped each other’s hands.

“I might,” Nadia replied.

But then, why hadn’t the people in question just bought them at the auction? If they were waiting on me to do it so I could heal them, they’d had to have known that I *could* heal them, and word about me shouldn’t have reached all the way to Grandol yet. Had the slaver used an appraisal skill of some kind on me? I asked Nadia for more details on who might want them this badly.

“Our father. Our brother. Also...” She trailed off. “Our fiancé. A Blanche earl, head of his house and descendant of a summoned hero, Lord Blade von Kamiya.”

Summoned? From what world? Kamiya sounded Japanese. Well, not like it mattered. We were talking about a descendant.

“Who was this hero?” I asked. “I’ve never heard of any Kamiya.”

“My father tells me the dukedom has kept many of his accomplishments a national secret.”

My next question was why they had left home to be in Grandol in the first place. If this were any other story, I’d say it was in defiance of an arranged marriage, but these two seemed the type to prioritize responsibility above all

else. Had something *forced* them to leave?

“I know this might not be something you want to think about, but I need to know,” I said. “Why did you leave Blanche? Did you disagree with your engagement?”

“No. I had made my peace with that. But three months before my coming-of-age ceremony, I received a message from the Draconis.”

“A message?”

“I was told that if I remained in my home, I would be overcome with hatred for the world. That I had to set out in search of the blessed one if I wanted to avoid such a fate.”

That timeline seemed to line up with when I had released the Holy Dragon. A chill went down my spine. Had I twisted fate and changed the world?

“I heard the Elemental before my ceremony too,” Lydia added. “But the family was on guard by then. The wedding was planned for immediately afterwards.” Nadia looked at her sister apologetically. “But the moment I received the Elemental’s blessing, everyone lost consciousness and I managed to escape.”

“How’d you meet up with Nadia again?” I asked.

“The Elemental told me to take a horse and ride, so I did. Eventually, I found her. We’ve been together ever since.”

I had obtained the water spirit’s blessing a little over a year ago, so that seemed to be unrelated to her situation. But that wasn’t cause for celebration. Two deities had warned different girls that staying in Blanche would be dangerous. And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel for Lord Kamiya a little, having two engagements canceled in a row. I didn’t know if I’d have ever recovered. *Assuming* these girls were of age, of course. I was too scared to ask how old Kamiya was.

“So, is it safe to assume the earl is searching for his two lost brides?” I asked.

Sensing my uncertainty, Nadia began to explain. “Lord Kamiya already has three wives and concubines. Our only purpose was to serve as hostages to keep

our father and brother in line. We decided we would rather save the world.”

Jeez, that was some harem. Polygamy might have been legal, but I still lost all sympathy for the guy.

“He’s a horrible man,” Lydia spat. “The heroism in his line died with the hero himself. Our father and brother don’t understand—*won’t* understand. Only mother did. And she...”

Lydia burst into tears. My one weakness. Had Brod not told me to stay off the Substance X, I might have been overcome with emotion just then. Sometimes the emotional dulling of being a healer had its perks.

Suddenly, I noticed that the sounds of battle had stopped. I’d been too focused on the conversation. Brod and Lionel had made me feel unconcerned about further attacks, but they were nowhere to be seen now. It was dead quiet. We might have just walked straight into a trap.

The fact that we’d split up wasn’t so strange, but the fact that Brod and Lionel weren’t coming right back was. Someone in the enemy ranks must have been a crafty tactician. If their goal was getting Nadia and Lydia, they only needed to isolate the two largest threats, slip through the opening, and abscond with them. And if that strategist were in possession of an appraisal skill, they could have easily gauged our fighting strength and crafted the perfect plan.

I immediately knew who our culprit might be.

“I think the slaver might be behind this,” I told Ketty and Kefin. “We need to move forward and find Master and Lionel.”

“Yes, sir,” Kefin said.

“We’ll keep an eye out!” Ketty agreed.

They mounted the carriage and pulled out, checking the path for traps and enemies. Soon, we came to a wall of fire blocking our path. On the other side were Brod and Lionel, outnumbered and seemingly struggling against the attackers as well as one other man: the slaver, smiling sadistically.

07 — The Slaver's True Colors

Brod and Lionel were visibly struggling on the other side of the wall of flames. I cast High Heal on them both with a long-range magic circle. At once, the grin left the slaver's face and his expression became muted.

"You really have no tact, do you?" he said, unamused. "I wasn't expecting you to figure it out so soon. Evidently, you're smarter than you look."

"I knew it," I shot back. "You're the one who tricked the sisters. And you're behind this too, aren't you?"

He smiled again. "It seems there *is* a brain between those ears. But I have to ask, what gave me away? What made you suspicious that I was behind it all?"

Everyone else had stopped to listen to our conversation. It was possible they were all slaves.

"For starters, you seemed awfully proud of yourself, the way you described how the sisters were enslaved."

"Did I? And how is that?"

"How would you have known about them being betrayed by their party?" I said. "Or about the hydra? Or the newbie adventurers they supposedly killed? You like the sound of your own voice too much."

"How strange would it be for me to have heard the details when doing business with their captors?" he challenged me again.

"True. Based on the cleanliness of your shop, you conduct business thoroughly. But the way you described it all, the confident glint in your eye—it struck me as someone who'd just gotten away with murder."

My hunch had been an incredibly faint one, and I'd only sensed it thanks to a certain skill I had learned in my past life: eye contact. It was part of the basics of business, and it had saved my butt this time.

His smile gradually faded again. "I see. That did indeed escape my own notice.

But what if I were merely repeating what my clients told me? What if *they* had described it in such a way?”

“Then that would mean you didn’t actually have a plan,” I taunted him. “And you’re stupider than I’m giving you credit for.”

If Lionel and Brod hadn’t been the ones to fall into the trap, this would’ve been a lot worse. The carriage would probably have been overrun, and we would have attacked the adventurers on the sidelines trying to escape, assuming they were also bandits.

“We’re done here,” the slaver said in a calm rage. “Clean this rabble up.”

The bandits lunged for Brod and Lionel again. Ketty and Kefin leaped through the fire without a second thought. I cast High Heal on them from a distance, then Recover and Dispel on the other two just in case.

“Oh, there was one other thing,” I said to the slaver. “One last mistake you made. Not as a slaver. Just a simple lack of attention.”

“Oh, do tell!”

“If you couldn’t even tell their genders when you first purchased them, how did you know they were a swordswoman and spirit magic user? The only explanation would be that you possess an appraisal skill of some kind.”

There would have been no other way. After how long I had perused the list of skills when I was first reincarnated, there wasn’t a single one I didn’t already know about. Unless there was. Which, admittedly, was possible.

“So what if I do?” the man spat.

“Then everything would start to make sense.”

The slaver was silent, and the air around him changed. The longer his attention was on me, the more time everyone had to get rid of the bandits.

“You having an appraisal skill would explain two things: why you thought I could heal the sisters and why you didn’t seem surprised when I ended up buying them at the auction.”

“So *what?*” he snapped again, glaring at me as the battle raged on.

“You saw my holy magic skill level and thought I might be able to heal them. That’s why you told your subordinate to treat them roughly when you handed them over. To see how I would react. And then you planted something in their slave pacts, didn’t you? But you had no idea I could nullify them.”

Suddenly, his anger vanished, and there was no emotion at all in his expression.

“So, you’ve foiled my plans. Is that it?”

“What plans?” I asked.

“I know what you are. There’s only one way people like us can be this talented so young—you’ve been reincarnated,” he declared. “Tell me how you got so strong in a mere six years and I might just let you keep your life.”

He was in his twenties? He didn’t look like it, so I hadn’t taken him for one of the reincarnated. Hatori, Rina, and I were all around the same age, but this man looked more like Brod’s age. Somewhere in his thirties.

“Reincarnated?” I repeated with feigned ignorance. “I do recall documents describing them as having power over space and time. If you’re one of them, I’ll have to take you in and find out more about these ‘plans’ of yours.”

“Was I mistaken? Regardless, you won’t get away with ruining my schemes. Stand there and watch as your friends become my pawns.”

The bandits threw themselves at my companions all at once. They had to be under his control.

“If you think I’m just going to let some spineless punk like you hurt my team, you’ve got another thing coming!” I shouted.

Enraged that one of the reincarnated would stoop so low, I cast Dispel on the bandits. Magic circles appeared on the slaves’ bodies, and once freed, they immediately stopped.

“Bastard!” the slaver roared. “After him! The one in white!”

The wall of fire disappeared. It seemed there had been a powerful mage under his command, and the slaver didn’t take kindly to me freeing them. The remaining slaves came straight for me, but Lionel and Brod kept them at bay. I

remained calm and continued to cast Dispel on four people at a time, slowly draining our opponent of his resources.

“Use your heads, you worthless pieces of garbage!” the slaver barked.

He ordered them to launch a ranged attack, but Ketty and Kefin were one step ahead and kept me safe. I continued casting Dispel and our enemies diminished drastically. By the time half of my MP had been drained, everyone was free, and the battle had come to a stop.

“Do you...” The slaver trembled with anger. “Do you have *any* idea how much time and money it cost me to gather that many slaves?!”

Why wasn’t he moving? And why was he so shaken? A man clever and meticulous enough to maintain the kind of shop he ran didn’t strike me as being the kind to lose his temper. I scanned our surroundings and soon discovered where my bad feeling was coming from.

“Watch out!” I shouted. “I freed everyone, but some of them are still...”—my voice quickly died—“obeying him.”

Lionel and Brod had already taken care of the remaining combatants before I could even finish. Apparently, I had been slow on the uptake. Freeing the slaves hadn’t actually rid us of all our enemies.

“Man, I like having those two around,” I murmured. “Ketty, Kefin, watch the carriage.”

They saluted and stood on either side of it, on the alert. There was no telling what our opponent would do, and I wanted everyone to be safe. I cast Area Barrier on our group one more time and returned my attention to the slaver. He was expressionless.

“Man, screw this,” he huffed. “Thought I was gonna get some high-level sacrifices...”

The former slaves turned their weapons on him, but as they charged him, he raised his hand to the sky, and a crimson magic circle appeared above him. Dark red lightning fired from it, striking the former slaves.

Who in the world was this guy? This was some final boss-level spectacle he

was putting on.

Concentrating my magic inside me, I addressed the slaver. “What are you trying to summon with that thing?!”

“So, you can tell this is a summoning circle. Impressive. It would’ve been nice of you to be a little duller, though,” he said. “I knew you were reincarnated! You damn cheater! What, you do your homework at the Church? Well, you got it! This here’s for summoning demons and monsters! And with all these slaves, I bet we’ll get a real doozy out of this one!”

He had mentioned sacrifices earlier. This guy was totally nuts. I had to calm him down a little, so I distracted him with a question.

“If reincarnation really does exist like you say it does, then why would you spend your second shot at life like this?” I asked. “You could be anything you wanted with talent like yours!”

His twisted expression turned blank again. He glared at me. “You’re right. I died and God showed me mercy, gave me another chance. But for what? To live in this dunghill of a world? I don’t want to hear a thing from someone like you who was born lucky.”

The magic circle grew bigger.

Everyone thinks about being reborn in another world at least once. About getting to do fantastical things like use magic. Because anything was possible with magic, even more so if you were given the chance to start over and choose your own skills, your own destiny.

But that wasn’t reality. Life and death were a delicate balance here, and it was no surprise that it had broken the slaver. That was still no excuse.

“You weren’t alone!” I shouted back. “Someone must have cared for you! Someone must have supported you!”

“Yes,” he said calmly. “You know what happened to them? This world *killed* them! And now I’m going to destroy it! I’m going to tear this mess down and rebuild it all over again!”

His arm tensed and his chest swelled with pride as he continued to summon

evil into the world.



He wasn't going to stop.

"I wish you'd see reason," I said.

The man cackled. "No one can save you now! You're nothing but experience points to me, and not even the gods can stop me from turning their favorite son into numbers on my status screen! Now, my servant! Come to...me? What?!"

The crimson magic circle began to crack as a pale light encroached upon the red, dyeing it white. I had put the last of my magic into a single Sanctuary Circle and overwritten his spell.

"Sorry, but no," I said. "You will not stand in the way of my dream! The bloodshed ends here!"

A pillar of light burst vertically from the epicenter of the spell, completely swallowing the dark red magic circle and whipping up a violent gust of wind.

"Damn you, healer!" he snarled. "You better watch your back, because the next time we meet, I'll crush that dream of yours with my own hands! You can hold on to those two for now. They'll play their part in my revenge eventually."

When the explosion ended and the wind had settled down, the slaver was nowhere to be seen. And thus was born a new enemy for me to have anxiety stomachaches about. I didn't know what "part" someone was supposed to play in his plot, but the threat alone was reason enough for me to resolve to train even harder.

08 — Aftermath

We never managed to find the slaver. Many of his victims were in bad shape after the attack, but miraculously, no one had died. After downing a potion, I cast Area Heal to make sure it stayed that way.

“I can’t believe you didn’t kill anyone,” I said to Lionel and Brod. They’d been dishing out some heavy hits, so I had been expecting a high body count.

“Luciel, take a look around,” my master said. “Not everyone here was a slave. Some of ’em are thugs, some adventurers, and there’s even a few foreign private soldiers, looks like. They were after info or somethin’.”

Well, I had gone and freed everyone, so now there was no way to tell who had been a slave and who hadn’t. Oops.

“Information? What, are they from some underground guild?”

“Well, you’ve had run-ins with the Mercenary’s Guild, haven’t you?”

“I’d prefer to forget, honestly,” I grumbled. “Anyway, that fight looked a little one-sided against you guys. I know they were mercenaries, but still.”

Brod smirked, and Lionel followed suit. The latter explained, “Not even the Whirlwind is invincible when outnumbered, sir. He’s certainly not what he was in his prime.”

“You stop feedin’ him lies,” Brod barked back. “We were pretending to be injured on purpose.” I tilted my head in confusion. He sighed. “It’s easier to get your opponent talking when you make them think they’ve won.”

“You arrived precisely when we managed to lure out their leader,” Lionel said.

Something still didn’t sit right with me. Had Lionel really been lying? Or had he seen through Brod’s facade? Lionel was exceptionally perceptive, after all. Perhaps being away from the front lines was starting to dull my master’s senses. Could it be that all that time he spent in the training grounds was to try and slow down the atrophy of his abilities? There was a saying in my past life

about acquired skills: use it or lose it.

I didn't know what my master was like in the past, but constantly fighting monsters out in the field had to have been better than being cooped up in the guildhall every day. And yet he was still a force to be reckoned with. That must have been what he meant when he always talked about not focusing on the numbers, that some things couldn't be reflected on a status screen. You could have the highest stats in the world, but you wouldn't have them forever.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," I said, "but are you losing your touch, Master? Were you letting yourself get hit to try and remember your combat senses?"

It seemed to me like he was still trying to get warmed up. Which wasn't to say he was weak, of course. He was still a monster.

"Maybe a little," he replied reluctantly. "These guys were pretty good. With that slaver calling the shots, they were fighting like A-rank adventurers. They were that coordinated."

"But you wouldn't take a hit against an A-rank, would you? You could take out Bazan's party in the blink of an eye."

"This ain't a training ground. Some of them fought dirty, and they were hard to predict," he explained carefully, noticing my worried expression. "Still had plenty o' fun, though. Some of those attacks were crazy and hit a bunch o' their own guys."

All of a sudden, I felt stupid for worrying about this battle-crazed lunatic.

"All I know is that I'd have died a dozen times over if it were me," I said.

"If *that'd* kill you, you better get ready for when we start training."

And there I went digging my own grave again. His eyes were fierce, and they said he'd kill me if I got cold feet now. My knees wobbled. I hadn't seen that look in a long time.

"A-Anyway," I said, desperately changing the subject, "I'm still surprised you managed to make it through that without killing anyone."

"Thought we'd have to, but they weren't so bad," Brod said. "You probably coulda handled 'em."

“You think so?”

Evidently, he did.

“I didn’t train you for nothin’. You could handle the pain and buy time with your healing magic easily.”

I guess he never mentioned anything about me going head-to-head with any of them. So, it wasn’t about my capabilities as a warrior.

“He’s being shy, sir,” Lionel interjected. “What he means to say is that your superb judgment and healing magic saved us. A second later, and we would have had to begin killing.”

Brod clicked his tongue. “Yeah, what he said. Bet a lot of those slaves didn’t wanna be fighting in the first place. Probably ended up where they did through no fault of their own.”

Not that this was a revelation or anything, but these two were unreal. Taking out all those enemies non-lethally, at that much of a disadvantage? If they had been going all out, I wouldn’t even have needed to step in. Sometimes Brod could move so fast that I couldn’t keep track of him, and Lionel was an impenetrable wall. But the fact that the slaver had gotten away, even with them here, stung a little.

“I wonder how he escaped,” I murmured.

“Huh? The guy?” said Brod. “That thing was an illusion.”

“A what now?”

“I tossed a stone at him at one point, but it passed right through him,” Lionel said.

Why hadn’t they told me? And who was the cheater now, huh? Yeah, cause this much of a stink without even being here, very fair.

“But if he was after the sisters, this whole thing feels too premature,” I muttered.

“Right,” Brod agreed. “And that was some force he threw at us just for two girls. If I were a betting man, I’d say his eyes were on Blanche itself.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“He had a dead man’s eyes. The eyes of someone who’s had something precious unjustly stolen from him. Grandol may look lawless, given it’s governed by the Adventurer’s Guild, but your rank’s everything here. When there’s a fire, the top adventurers go to snuff it out, so it’s strange that someone would become so deranged. His hatred must be directed at an organization, hierarchy, or country.”

“But why Blanche, specifically?”

“Because it’s where the sisters are from,” Brod said. “If guild requests were involved, there might be a trail to follow.”

My master was more clever than he looked.

“But who says it’s Blanche? It could be Illumasia or Luburk, couldn’t it?” I asked. “They’re monarchies with systems of aristocracy too.”

“Unlikely,” Lionel said. “The two are at war. It would be difficult to acquire slaves under such a circumstance.”

“I see. And you thought of all that, Master?”

“Just a hunch,” Brod replied. “If word gets out a bunch o’ Blanche soldiers attacked an S-rank healer trying to get back a couple runaway nobles, there could be an international incident.”

That was a lot of information he had gathered from just one fight. He really was amazing. But something else was worrying me now.

“If all that is true, then I think he probably hates me.”

“Ya *think*?”

Sure, he had told me he would crush my dreams with his own hands—in other words, my hopes for a peaceful life—but in my defense, he had swung first.

“In any case, what should we do with all these people?” I asked.

“Half of ’em would be killed if this were a normal bandit attack, just to make a statement,” Brod answered. “It’ll take time to investigate, but we’re close to

HQ, so they'll probably put some pros on it."

I wasn't gutsy enough to ask what sorts of "pros" they would be. Not after seeing the pitying gaze he gave our attackers.

We tied everyone up, lined them up in two rows, and headed back. The trip took three times as long this time.

Ketty and Kefin rode ahead so that by the time we made it to town, there were already HQ staff and slavers present at the gate. Once all the attackers were made into slaves, I followed my master's advice and left the investigation to the guild.

"Think they'll learn anything?" I asked him.

"Can't say," he replied. "But they'll sure as hell try, considering Merratoni's best was in the thick of it."

"That'll be good for your popularity."

"The higher-ups can think whatever they want about me. They'll probably find some useful stuff they've been itching to know, though, so I might earn a few favors." He stared absentmindedly at our aggressors.

"How so?"

"The guild's management and job regulation standards will come into question, thanks to this little incident."

"You're saying there might have been foul play? Would using my position help things at all?"

"Won't need anything from you. We're not a rotten bunch, and this'll go straight to the top anyway."

"What kind of person runs the guild?" I asked.

"The kinda philosophical idealist who wants to cleanse the world of all evil," he answered. He was smiling but probably unconsciously. "So not the flexible type."

"That's reassuring," I said.

“There’s something I oughta look into, though. Wait here.”

He left for the guildhall with an oddly excited spring in his step. Still, it felt like all I’d done since leaving Merratoni was push more work onto him.

“I spoil myself with him,” I murmured. “Lionel, what do you think that slaver was going to summon if I hadn’t stopped him?” Thankfully, we’d never know for sure, but I remembered how much the sight had made me tremble.

“Given the summoning circle’s size, I would guess something of considerable stature,” he answered, furrowing his brow. It wasn’t often that he made that expression. “Or possibly even a demon.”

I didn’t blame his somber attitude. Anyone who was capable of summoning demons might as well have been the Demon Lord himself.

“And it would’ve been even stronger than the ones we fought on the way to Merratoni, wouldn’t it?”

“If he has discovered how to conjure and subjugate demons, yes, I don’t doubt the battle would have been bloody.”

“I remember hearing the land where the demons live, which Lord Reinstar sealed away, borders Illumasia,” I said. “Have you ever fought them in the past?”

“I have,” he replied. “I had many encounters with them some twenty years ago.”

“How do they compare to now?”

“I’ve grown considerably myself, so it’s difficult to say. But the ones we faced recently weren’t particularly powerful in comparison.”

My eyes widened. “Even for a demon?”

“My theory is that Lord Reinstar’s protective barrier may have something to do with it.”

Strong monsters weren’t supposed to be able to pass through, and it was what let Shurule’s people live in peace. Without it...I didn’t want to think about it.

“Twenty years ago,” I muttered. “So they’ve become rarer?”

“Yes.”

“That change didn’t, uh, correspond to a change in leadership, did it?”

“It did, in fact. There was a great shift in the courts when the emperor passed. I was already a general at the time and was unaffected.”

I found myself yet again reminded to never visit Illumasia. Ever.

“How old were you when you became a general?” I asked.

“Now, those are nostalgic times,” he said. “I was twenty.”

That was even younger than me. He must have been incredible (especially considering he already was).

As I pondered the absurdity of Lionel’s character, Brod returned with Ketty and Kefin. I wanted to talk with Estia about something, but that could wait.

“The money they get outta selling those slaves will be deposited into your account,” my master said.

“You’re sure?” I asked. “You can take it if you want. I’m the one who dragged you all the way out here.”

“You can pay me back by taking the heat off me when we get home.”

“I suppose I could do that,” I said. “But if the adventurers Ketty and Kefin captured were tricked and didn’t mean to hurt anyone, go ahead and free them.”

Some of them had been crying their eyes out on the way here. One look at that was enough to make me want to give them a second chance. They might have had some bad luck, but maybe a bit of hope would give them the push they needed to crawl back out of their pit.

“You’re a softy,” Brod said. “But maybe that’s what it takes to keep guys like that slaver from being born. All right, I’ll let ’em know. That was some detour we took, though. What now?”

“We can camp outside, so let’s just leave. I’d rather not give anyone more time to set up another trap for us to walk into. Plus, the more training, the

better.”

“That’s my apprentice! Enough lollygaggin’ and let’s go!”

“Yes, sir.”

We left our attackers in the care of the Adventurer’s Guild and set out for the labyrinth of ants once again.

09 — Next Stop: Training

One of the most convenient things about Grandol was that there were usually small villages located near every labyrinth. Seeing the lights of a local inn in the distance as the sun set was a very welcome sight. It sure beat camping outside.

When I first learned about this phenomenon, I thought it sounded a little dangerous for the townsfolk and more than a little risky for the merchants. But it was precisely that danger that constantly drew more adventurers, and every village had contact with HQ, so apparently there were no records of any towns actually destroyed by monster stampedes. This, in turn, made Grandol the largest supplier of magic stones, and the only supplier of them to Neldahl.

I, foolishly, had been hoping for a good night's sleep in a bed, where I could recover both physically and emotionally.

"Master, mind telling me what we're doing at a labyrinth when there's a town right there?"

"To sharpen you up," Brod replied. "You've lost your edge."

"I had an edge?"

"I felt it when we fought in the Holy City, and I was hoping you'd only get better from there. But you let yourself get naive again. You're as spineless as a worm right now."

When we'd fought in the Holy City? That was right after I'd cleared the Labyrinth of Trials. Where I'd had to fight tooth and nail just to survive. Good memories.

"I think I was more *on* edge back then," I said.

"Well you're lackin' it now. I bet I know what you're thinking. You got me and the Lion to take care of everything, so what's there to be afraid of? But you *should* be afraid. Because you won't improve without that drive."

"Is it that bad?"

“Yeah,” he replied. “But don’t start moping. You might be talentless, but you’ve seen real combat and stared death in the face. Once a man’s experienced that, it’s easy to remind him of it.”

“Are you sure you’re not just mad that I said you lost your touch?” I asked.

“You think I’m that petty? Getting you back in shape’s the goal of your training from now on, so you’re gonna have to fight for your life. *With* your life.”

I could sense my master’s sincere desire to help me get better. He was right. I was talentless, but I had experienced gruesome dismemberment and practically shaken hands with the reaper on numerous occasions. If Substance X hadn’t boosted my resistances, or if I had been without my angel’s pillow, who knows what might have happened to me.

Still, the greatest factor in my success was undoubtedly the fact that I hadn’t given up. Trapped in a dungeon with no hope for rescue, I had fought with everything I had. Personally, I thought I got the same feeling from sparring with Brod or Lionel, but apparently not. Also, what were we going to do once I got my groove back? Why did I think I was going to get answers by asking myself these questions?

“I definitely think I remember what it feels like to nearly be dead,” I insisted.

“There are certain things you can’t learn unless you’re pushed right to the brink,” Brod continued. “We’re going to turn that cowardice of yours into a weapon, and in order to do that, we’re gonna have to crack some eggs.”

“We’re going to have problems if I’m one of the eggs.”

Brod gave me a hard look that sent goosebumps rippling across my skin and caused me to break into a cold sweat. I was ready for whatever he could throw at me, but if even *he* was claiming this would be tough, I was in for a new layer of hell. And that was saying something, considering he had never let me heal my aches or bruises during our old training sessions, and how he would nearly gore me during sword sparring, and how I wouldn’t be able to stand by the end of the day... Why was I remembering all this fondly?

“So here’s the deal,” he said. “We’re gonna get you to be able to sense

presences and magic so well you won't even need your eyes anymore."

"I'd like to keep those, please."

"In other words, we're gonna take your other senses out of the equation. Now, is this dangerous? Hell yes. But with your healing, I think you'll really be able to master it, and soon you'll be reading your opponents and thinking ten steps ahead."

Who, me? Did he say I wasn't going to get to use my eyes or ears? In a *labyrinth*?

"Out of curiosity, has anyone ever actually been able to reach that level before?"

The fact that he was so confident probably meant that damn near no one had ever done it.

"Lord Reinstar did," he answered. "And a few others. Granted, Reinstar could hear the spirits, so his case is a little special."

Who was that smile meant for? It certainly couldn't have been me. What gave him the impression that just because "a few others" had done it before, I could too? Those were likely combat prodigies or fighting masters. Still, Brod had a weird way of inspiring that same baseless confidence of his in me.

At the same time, I had to wonder how useful such a skill would really be to me. I was just a regular dude—and the moment I thought that, I felt something intense behind me. I whipped around and saw Lionel and the others grinning excitedly. Now that I thought about it, maybe the fact that they hadn't stopped this meant that they thought I could do it too.

"I think it's a promising idea," Lionel said. "Expanding the tools at one's disposal is always a good thing."

"Could take a while. All you're good at sensing is when people wanna kill you," said Ketty.

"We'll be with you the entire way," Lionel reassured me.

"I believe you can do it, sir," Kefin said.

"Lydia and I will support you how we can," Nadia chimed in.

“I will try my best to help you sense the auras of the spirits,” said her sister.

Everyone was brimming with enthusiasm. Brod must have run it by them already. But they were going to regret it when all that time he would have spent on me was directed their way while I was busy being blind and deaf. It was certainly going to be worse than anything I’d get, and they’d still have to be on guard duty.

Brod took out a thick cloth. “I’d give this your all if you don’t wanna disappoint.”

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“Well, we were gonna just pop your eyes out, but it’d sting a bit, and wouldn’t want you to be distracted,” he said. “Blindfold yourself. It’s special-made and won’t slip off.”

With trembling hands, I covered my exceedingly un-popped eyes and tied the cloth around my head. The next moment, I felt an intimidating aura from my master and jumped back instinctively.

“Good reflexes,” he said. “Stay sharp. You’re gonna struggle. Also, no high-level healing magic. Keep it low and at a minimum.”

“That’s part of the training, I’m assuming?”

“If you think you’re always gonna have your magic to lean on, think again. There’re more ways to snuff out spells than you wanna know.”

“What if I heal myself anyway?” I asked.

“You’re free to stop whenever you want. I’ll just admit that I’m not as good at picking apprentices as I thought.”

It felt like he was teasing me, but there was a hint of unease in his voice. He probably wasn’t lying about letting me end the training whenever. So why subject me to something this intense in the first place?

“Just curious,” I laughed. “What if I take the blindfold off?”

“Then you’ll have to heal yourself a new pair of eyeballs.”

Yeah, he wasn’t joking. This was a man who didn’t go back on his word. Unlike

in the past, though, my consent seemed to be a factor this time.

“What about your match with Lionel?” I asked. “I’ve been looking forward to it too, so shouldn’t we do that before we start focusing on me?”

“It’s gonna take a while for us to shake the rust off,” he replied. “If you can learn how to really *feel*, listen to the earth and the rhythms in the air, and you start to sense magic, you can start copying my style and make it your own. And if you can do that, no dragon or demon’s gonna be able to get one up on you. But first, I gotta get back to my prime.”

“Mister Luciel is not your apprentice alone, Whirlwind,” Lionel interjected, “though I share the general sentiment. However, imitation will only take him so far. The logical next step after learning to sense movements is to develop the reflexes and technical skill to make use of it.”

“He’ll do that while he levels up,” Brod said flippantly. “If he can start copying us, he’ll understand what he needs to improve on better.”

So it was just decided that I was going to end up copying from their canvases. Great. No pressure or anything.

I sighed on the inside. I had to remember that the first step to success was believing in yourself.

I can do it, I repeated to myself.

“There’s a peaceful life waiting for you at the end of this,” Brod said.

I heard his footsteps grow distant. As ridiculous as the man was, this insane training was for my sake. And that made me nostalgic for the old days, for some reason. Maybe I was brainwashed. But then I thought of the slaver, and suddenly I was motivated again. The thought of spending time in a labyrinth full of ants, without my eyes, made me want to cry, but I also wanted to meet my master’s expectations.

“Oh, we should have dinner first,” I said. “Too bad Master won’t be joining us.”

“The hell he’s not.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin. I’d thought he was long gone, but I suddenly

heard his voice directly behind me.

“Don’t scare me like that.”

“Then learn how to sense me.”

“Let me get right on that.”

I touched my magic bag, and a list of its contents appeared in my mind. I called out food enough for everyone, but I had to have someone hand me my silverware and help me eat. And the worst part was...I had to have *Brod* spoon-feed me. Boy, did he enjoy it.

“You’re not much better than a baby right now,” he said. “If that pisses you off, then focus on getting this thing down.”

I knew this was just his way of pumping me up, but I didn’t have the patience to sit around waiting to obtain a skill when I didn’t even know if it was possible. So I called upon an old partner—Assess Mastery.

With my sight still lost, I checked on my skills for the first time in a while. This way, I could test the waters and figure out the most efficient way to improve. It had been a long time since I last felt the excitement of practicing something new, and it was beginning to overtake my anxiety.

I couldn’t wait to blow my master away.

10 — Return to Hell

Nadia and Lydia stood to my sides, guiding me in the self-imposed darkness. Not by the hand, only verbally, but even that was a huge help. I felt my way with the Illusion Staff, and even then I managed to nearly fall several times. It was extremely bad for my back, that was for sure.

The more I thought about it, the worse I felt. Especially when combined with the sense of unease that grew stronger the longer we went without encountering an enemy. All I could really do was pray that my Detect Danger skill would do its job.

And then it did.

“Good luck,” Brod called to me, pushing me from behind a second before I felt Detect Danger warn me of the threat.

“Good luck with *what?*” I asked.

“Go on and take out those enemies. It’s just a swarm of ants, so go nuts. This is your first step to getting your edge back.” He almost sounded entertained.

“So, good luck.”

Suddenly, I heard a door shut behind me. I called my companions’ names but got no response.

“You’re kidding me.”

This single act might have outdone every method of torture I’d been subjected to. You just didn’t do something like this to someone who, you know, relied on their eyes to see.

I heard a weird clicking and some shuffling along the ground, and my heart rate shot up at once. I cast Area Barrier and waited to feel out the enemies’ attacks. Brod had only banned healing magic, so he was going to have to deal with it. And my armor was top of the line. I wouldn’t go down easily.

Feeling a prick to the side, I swung the Illusion Sword in that direction but hit

nothing but air. Something hit me in the gut. It must have been a feint. Now that I was sure I wasn't in any immediate danger, I thrust my fist in the direction the attack had come from and made contact with something gross.

"Weak. It's just their numbers," I murmured. "So now I just need to figure out how to sense them."

Reassured, I put the Illusion Sword away, took out my Holy Dragon spear, and waited, searching for that prickling sensation.



I used sound to give me a rough idea of the environment and honed my senses, gauging the differences between my perceptions when I landed a hit and correcting myself accordingly. Eventually, I was supposed to be able to use magic to feel my surroundings, but I had no success there yet.

“I forgot, labyrinths are *always* emitting magic,” I muttered. It was frustrating. But if I could just learn to distinguish the monsters’ magic from the labyrinth’s and my own, I should be able to effectively accomplish the same goal. “Time to brush off the ol’ positivity, I guess. Let’s do th— Ow!”

A glob of some kind of liquid hit my hand in the middle of my pep talk. It started to itch, so I cast Heal to be safe, and the sensation vanished.

“Acid? I need to stay focused or Master’s going to make fun of me. And he doesn’t need more fuel.”

I spread my feet out to shoulder-width, lowered my stance, strengthened my grip on the spear, and took a breath. My best chance was to counter, but waiting for an attack was nerve-racking and stressful. Still, that was probably the only sure way I’d know where to swing. According to Assess Mastery, I was gaining experience and on the right track.

All the people I had met were probably sensitive to this kind of thing. Magic and presences and whatnot. There were times I’d suspected as much, especially when I, the one token reincarnated guy, seemed to lack something that everyone else had. It was most likely something people in this world grew up slowly and unconsciously practicing their whole lives. But I wasn’t about to use that as an excuse to lie down and die.

“It might be hard to stand up to people who have been doing this since childhood, but I’ve worked twice as hard. Get ready, ants. You’re about to be stepping stones on my journey!”

“Then why don’t we make this harder?” Immediately following my inspirational soliloquy was not a battle, but Brod’s interjection. “Shut up and do something. You’re makin’ me cringe over here.”

“Um...how long have you been there?” I asked.

“Since the beginning. Contrary to what you might think, I am aware of the

absurdity of what I'm asking you to do, but you really gotta shut up. Anyway, let's move on."

I didn't want to take it lying down, but Brod wasn't going to put up with any complaining, and the embarrassment was too much anyway. So we moved on. I could hear everyone else trying and failing to hold in their laughter too. Deep down, though, I knew they were cheering me on, so I managed to hold back the tears.

Without so much as a break, we moved from one spot to the next, looking for fights. Two people would stick by me until I cleared the area on my own while everyone else rested or sparred. At least, that was what Nadia told me.

"I didn't think they'd need me to use High Heal this many times," I said. "I hope Master's not killing anyone."

"We're all simply experiencing firsthand how formidable Lionel and your instructor are," she replied. Nadia was hungry to learn from them, and it sounded like she was enjoying it.

"Are they not doing any sparring themselves?"

"They say that if they start, they'd refuse to end the match in a draw. They're sparring only with us so as to avoid a never-ending bout between themselves."

That was a pair of rivals, all right. From what I'd heard, they were still undefeated, even by Ketty, Kefin, and Estia. It was downright impossible to grasp the strength of people like them, who were over level four hundred.

I sighed, earning a chuckle from Nadia. "I know they're strong, but let them know to come right over if they get hurt," I said.

"Will do."

I ended up spending time with everyone—Estia, Nadia, Lydia—and although it felt like they were enjoying themselves at my expense a little too much, we grew a little closer. My only breaks were the times between changing locations and when people needed me to heal them. Other than that, I was told I could eat or sleep whenever I wanted.

As the ants we encountered got stronger, the strain on my mind got heavier.

More and more focus was demanded of me, but I was getting a handle on this sensing thing. After our seventh meal, I even noticed I'd finally acquired the Detect Magic skill.

That was where things went a little south.

"Are...the labyrinth's magic and the monsters' magic the same?" I muttered.

I had been managing to generally suss out the positions of the ants without Detect Magic, but now that I had it, my mind was drawn more to their auras...which, ironically, just made me blind all over again. Earlier in the labyrinth, the monsters' magic had stood out more against the labyrinth's. Now, though, they were about the same.

Before I could solve this problem, we ended up clearing the place.

"We've done as much as we can. Let's move on," Brod called out to me. "Get the horses out of the hermit key and the carriage from your bag. And some food while you're at it. You can have yourself a break after that."

I did so, summoning my trusty angel's pillow while I was at it so I could get some much-needed rest. Before I could drift off, though, something nibbled on my head. Assuming it was Forêt, I cast Purification, then went back to sleep.

The rolling of the carriage woke me up.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"You're awake," Brod said. "We're outside the labyrinth."

"I had a good sleep. Is Forêt... Ah, she's back in the hermit key, isn't she?"

"Yeah. Saw her biting you. Figured I'd discipline her a little, but that Estia girl gave me a nasty look."

The Spirit of Dusk definitely wouldn't let that fly. She'd have wiped his memory if she were mad enough, so it was a good thing it had ended with just a warning shot, so to speak.

"Sure wish I could enjoy the scenery," I said.

"Should be coming up to the Labyrinth of Canis soon," Brod noted. "Only

wolf-types there. So if it bugs you, take out your frustration on them.”

I wanted to tell him a few other ways I could vent my grievances but kept my mouth shut and nodded. It was oddly quiet, like only Brod was here. But I could faintly tell from my burgeoning sensing abilities that other people were nearby.

Not long after, we arrived at the next labyrinth. I had just opened the hermit key to let the horses in when I suddenly felt something. My eyes were veiled, but I could tell that Forêt was there. She approached, nibbled my head, then went back inside. She seemed worn out, so I cast Extra Heal on her before she was gone, and she neighed quietly at me in response.

“That’s so weird,” I muttered. “She’s like a spotlight.” I grinned at myself, quickly stopping when I felt Brod looking at me like I was crazy.

After food and another break, training resumed.

Even all my armor and Area Barrier didn’t stop the enemies’ attacks from knocking me off balance. And the monsters of the Labyrinth of Canis hunted me with deadly coordination, pouncing at me in an almost uncannily strategic rhythm. Only the smallest pattering of paws, the faintest of breaths told me where they were, and my only hope of landing a hit was the moment they lunged when I could sense them fully. They were too fast and clever to hit any other time. Lord help me if more than one came at me at a time.

Still, I did manage to take out a few. Except, if I didn’t make it clean, the smell of blood would only attract more. So I stayed calm, didn’t give up, and concentrated on discerning where the monsters were in relation to myself.

After our second meal in the labyrinth, I finally acquired the Detect Presence skill.

“Am I awesome or what?” I said to myself, causing someone to sigh behind me. I’d gone and made a fool of myself in front of my master again, hadn’t I? Well that wouldn’t put a damper on my excitement this time. “I got the Detect Magic and Detect Presence skills. I think I’m starting to get a feel for this.”

“Then it’s going well, huh?” he replied. “You really do have dedication to spare, Luciel. That’s why I made you my apprentice.”

“Where’s this coming from?” I asked. I didn’t like where I saw this conversation heading.

“From now on, stand down if you feel something intense and overwhelming. It’ll be me or the Lion. A grab on the elbow means it’s time to move. If someone touches your right shoulder, it means it’s time for a break. Left shoulder means use healing magic. Both at once, take out the carriage. If someone hugs you, use Extra Heal on yourself. Got it?”

“Uh, I guess? But why?”

He handed me a soft, rodlike object with rounded tips. “Magic earplugs. I *was* gonna shove a stick in your... Well, never mind.”

Feeling out the object, I managed to get an idea for what it was *supposed* to be, but it wasn’t earplugs. It felt more like over-ear headphones. I put it on, and just like that everything went quiet.

I took them off. “Fine, but at least let me take them off when we eat.”

“Deal. Now put ‘em back on and get training.”

Not even my hearing would be spared. Back on Earth, I was pretty sure this constituted a type of torture. Well, if you didn’t already consider this whole thing torture, that is. But I didn’t. I was doing this because I wanted to. To train. I could stop whenever I wanted. As soon as I stopped caring.

Still, something about Brod was off, and it seemed like even he had misgivings about this next step. When he had called me his apprentice earlier, I could’ve sworn I’d heard his voice shake a little.

I could hear my heart hammering in my ears all the more due to my dulled senses. Was I actually getting excited? I hoped not. If that got out, they’d start calling me the Masochist Zombie all over again.

And so the brutality intensified.

11 — An Uninvited Guest

In the forty years I'd been alive, counting my past life, the thought of throwing in the towel had crossed my mind on numerous occasions. But I never did, because I knew that, at some point, I would come out okay. One trial would end, and I'd be ready for the next.

The first encounter after losing my hearing was ugly. I got bitten more times than I could count, and it was only thanks to my armor and Area Barrier that I managed to make it through without a scratch. Even blind and deaf, I could tell my master was frustrated, but I liked to think that I was using my skills decently enough. The farther we went, however, the stronger the monsters got, and the more varied their attack patterns became. I found myself struggling against their dexterous lunges more and more.

The stress nearly got to me on numerous occasions, but every time, just before the boiling point, one of the girls would come over and take my hand, calming me down. Sometimes I'd even fall asleep like that. Combined with Brod's inability to bark at me the whole time, my sanity was hanging in there overall.

After our twenty-second meal, I noticed that Detect Magic, Detect Presence, *and* Detect Danger had all leveled up at once. Suddenly, the jumbled information that I had struggled to parse before became clear, and I started to be able to "see" the monsters' movements within a meter of me. Although I celebrated this progress, I kept my wits about me, because progress meant it was prime time for Brod to amp up the difficulty again. Personally, I thought it was a little unfair, but I told myself I just needed to believe. He wouldn't ask me to do the impossible, and if anything, his constant intimidating aura worked wonders for my resistance to it.

It took all of my focus to make out the faint entities lurking in the overwhelming aura of the labyrinth, but once they entered my range, I could feel them clearly enough to strike. My skill levels had improved my abilities

immensely, and I secretly hoped my progress would be praise-worthy by the time we were done.

Just then, I felt someone's hands touch both of my shoulders. After a quick moment, I remembered it was the signal to take out the carriage. It was time to move on to a new labyrinth.

When I opened the hermit key to call out the horses, I felt a presence shine faintly among the others. I could almost see the form of Forêt before me, as if I were looking with my mind's eye (though I didn't actually have that specific skill). She nibbled on my head a little more gently than she usually did, and I felt the stress of training drain away. Maybe that was why she always did it. To tell me that I was worrying myself too much.

Before I could thank her, I went out like a light. Someone had probably laid me on the angel's pillow. I managed to cast the cleansing magic she loved so much with the last of my awareness, and then sleep took me.

Something woke me up again, but in my current state I had no idea what. So I simply meditated. I hoped that maybe these skills would eventually let me identify people by color or something while we ate before resuming training.

As someone guided me into the labyrinth, I prayed that I wouldn't lose my sense of smell, taste, or touch next. Soon, though, I would realize those worries were for naught, because when we encountered our first enemy, I could recognize the stench at once—goblins. That only gave way to *new* worries, however.

Goblins weren't particularly difficult to deal with, as most of their weaponry consisted of clubs or rusted swords, but the ones you had to worry about were the coordinated groups. Some of them were a not-insignificant danger with a bow, and some of them could cast spells. I might have been able to sense their magic and whatnot, but I couldn't tell what equipment they were packing, which made things much more dangerous.

I stopped and took a deep breath. My master would step in if my life was really in danger. Believing that, I forced my legs to carry me forward again.

Focusing my mind, I could faintly make out the locations of my opponents in

my black, mute world, although I would've liked it if they'd made themselves a little more obvious, like Forêt.

Eventually, I sensed a surge of anger coming from a direction I hadn't sensed anything from. I raised my shield and prepared to take an attack head-on. The fact that I was relying so much on the shield spoke to how few options there were. My hands were moist with sweat and I could hear my heart pounding in my ears, but in my panic, I learned something. The ants and wolves had only seen me as prey, but the goblins were different. There was something else to their anger, something malevolent.

This realization changed everything. Before, I had been failing to judge the timing of their attacks, but now I could see that their hatred swelled at the moment of aggression. I still struggled with distance, but once I started reacting accordingly, I felt much safer. I could finally free more of my mind to focus on the fight.

As we delved deeper, though, the density of environmental magic increased, which made it harder to detect monsters. I could, of course, still locate them by presence alone. The scary thing was that some of them could *hide* their presence, making them effectively invisible to me.

For the record, the irony of me owing my life to goblins being evil was not lost on me. Brod and Lionel probably thought I was on the goblins' level in that regard, given I had as little control over my presence as they did.

The labyrinth itself felt like a natural cave, complete with sudden changes in elevation that nearly made me eat dirt, and dips in the ceiling that my head quickly became intimately acquainted with. I didn't need sound to know that everyone was laughing at me, so I quietly muttered under my breath that one of these days I'd give them a mug of Substance X for every single chuckle. That shut them up. In their defense, though, maybe the stress was just getting to me.

Based on how often the others asked me to cast High Heal during our breaks, it didn't seem like I was the only one working my butt off. I hadn't noticed at first, but their presences always got a little weaker around lunchtime (aside from Brod's and Lionel's, of course). They were training just like I was, and that

sense of unity made it kind of fun. Plus, being able to use Assess Mastery even with my eyes closed and getting to see my physical progress kept my motivation high.

Still, for a group of skills that were supposed to grow naturally over time, they sure were hard to level, even without the use of my eyes or ears. Detecting something gave me little more than one experience point, and by the time the battle was over, I could only expect about three more. I assumed any variations in that came from the enemy's strength and whether or not they had any stealth skills.

One thing became clear, though. I couldn't reliably hope for skills to improve unless I was specifically focusing on them. That must have been why none of the sensing skills had come to me naturally. Frankly, I wanted to kick myself. I should've known better, because I'd already seen what a difference visualization had on improving my healing magic.

Now that I had Detect Danger, Detect Presence, *and* Detect Magic, maybe they'd start to synergize in unique ways. Maybe I really would awaken the oh-so-coveted "mind's eye" that I'd seen in all sorts of novels and manga.

I cracked a grin, completely unaware of the peculiar look Brod was giving me as I did.

The training continued without incident, but in a labyrinth, it was only a matter of time before that changed.

It happened after my detection skills hit level three, expanding my range of awareness to two meters. We had just finished our forty-sixth meal when a monster appeared with a presence so intense that it made all the previous goblins seem like little sparks in comparison. I was taken aback for a moment, but I could feel my allies nearby and cast Area Barrier. We took battle formations, and the next moment all the presences scattered.

It never even occurred to me to take the blindfold off or the earplugs out. All that mattered to me in that moment was striking down the threat, so I filled the Illusion Sword with magic and activated Physical Enhancement, channeling my mana through my body. Only one thought occupied my mind: I will not die.

Focusing on the magic and malice emanating from the enemy, I nearly charged forward, but I stopped myself. It would be reckless to rush into a battlefield blind—in this case literally.

In that instant of hesitation, I felt the enemy's malice dissipate, as if self-assuredly saying I had made the right choice. As everyone engaged in battles all over, I sensed blips of monsters appearing and vanishing seemingly at random.

Suddenly, the malice swelled again, and my hair stood on end. I lowered my stance and readied my shield for whatever attack was approaching. But the sense of dread remained. Just then, two presences rushed in front of me, which I recognized as Brod and Lionel. Next came a wave of heat, followed by a horrible stinging sensation. The ground shook. I cast Recover, Dispel, and High Heal on everyone at once and lunged for the source of the surging energy.

I could have stayed in my lane and let the others take care of everything, but something felt off, like the monster had the upper hand. We needed something else. The nature of the labyrinth's magic gave me a solid enough grasp of the terrain, and I trusted everyone to keep the monsters off me. Once I was close, I could feel the enemy's movements, so as long as I stayed on my toes, I could handle myself.

This caught the enemy by surprise. I felt its hatred focus on me, then a prickling sensation crawled up the back of my neck. I leaped into the air, and it vanished. It must have been Detect Danger, and now that the sensation was gone, that had to mean it was my chance to attack.

I put away the Illusion Sword, summoned the Holy Dragon spear, imbued it with magic, and hurled it. There was no way for me to know if it struck home, but I did feel the monster's energy weaken. When I landed, I took the Illusion Sword back out and rushed the enemy, my stance low. A handful of paces away, the prickling sensation returned. I brought the sword down in front of me and almost saw what looked like a ball of black mist bursting.

At the same time, pain shot through my body. I struggled to hang on to my consciousness and managed to get a High Heal out, but the agony only worsened. This was what I got for getting cocky. Perhaps it was a curse.

Suddenly, someone threw their arms around me. A hug. Almost

automatically, I free cast Extra Heal, Dispel, and Recover in quick succession. As I felt the light envelop me, I saw a woman, an angel, looking at me with concern in her eyes. But she was gone in an instant, taking the light with her.

The next to enter my vision were the worried faces of my companions. My master had grabbed me and was holding me in his arms, having removed both the blindfold and earplugs.

“Master,” I said groggily, “I healed myself. I’m going to sleep now.”

Only fragments of his voice reached my quickly fading consciousness.
“Don’t...st...rest...”

I surrendered to slumber.

12 — A Prophecy

I was content to continue lying there, soothed by a calming hand as it stroked my hair. But I had to wake up.

When I blinked my eyes open, I was greeted with an unfamiliar ceiling. I yawned as I roused my body and noticed that I had been taken to a bedroom. Relieved that I seemed to be somewhere safe, I began to wonder if the hand I'd felt on my head had just been my imagination. Then, I realized I was holding something in my own hand.

"What am I doing with the hermit key?"

Wondering would bring me no answers. I was just glad that all my limbs and organs seemed to be where they were supposed to.

I got out of bed and stretched, getting ready to head out to find the others, when I noticed I was still in full armor.

"How'd I fall asleep like this?"

Finally, it started to come back to me. I'd gone down during a fight. I checked my gear but thankfully found no damage. Mysteries still remained, though. Where had that pain come from? What had that attack been? And how had it negated my curse resistances?

Just then, everyone came inside. Brod sighed in relief when he saw me, then smiled confidently.

"You're up," he said. "Had us worried. There was nothing wrong with you as far as we could tell, but you never woke up." He huffed. "You're gonna make me go bald one day, you little shit. Charging a demon like that!"

"Excuse me, a *what*?"

I'd thought it had been a goblin king at worst. But a demon? I was lucky to be alive. The thought sent belated chills down my spine. Maybe I should have resorted to Sanctuary Circle at the time.

“A demon. No mistaking it. It was pretty easy to tell, considering not even me and the Lion together could put more than a scratch on it.”

What surprised me this time wasn't the demon's strength, but the fact that apparently Brod and Lionel had been attacking it. I hadn't sensed them doing anything but defending me.

“Are normal attacks not as effective against them?” I asked.

“Guess so,” Brod replied. “And *you* killed the thing in one hit. Looks like I *do* know how to pick an apprentice.” He reached down and ruffled my hair. I could feel the genuine relief and joy inside him. I vaguely recalled seeing tears in his eyes after he'd removed my blindfold.

There was more to this training regimen if even my master had been that worried. It felt like he was being more impatient than normal, and his rashness had led to me getting hurt. He was probably blaming himself for it.

“It's good you're well,” Lionel said. He turned to Brod “Whirlwind, you need to tell him.”

“I was going to.” My master closed his eyes for a moment before fixing them on me. He took a seat and lowered his head. “Luciel, listen. I'm sorry for putting you through that.”

I blinked in confusion. It was so sudden, so unexpected, that I barely managed to squeeze out a single word. “Sorry?”

“Adventurer's Guild Headquarters is home to a seer,” Lionel replied first. “The Whirlwind was given a prophecy.”

“A prophecy? About what?” I asked.

“He was told that...he would die soon. Protecting someone,” he said. “He feared that his time was running short, so he came to us with this training regimen and begged us, head lowered, not to speak a word of it to you.”

A guild-employed prophet? I didn't take Brod for the type to believe in divination, but after a vanishing mine near Merratoni, talk of dragons and spirits, demons, and reincarnations, maybe it wasn't so hard to believe anymore. And maybe he had been told that by someone he trusted.

“I wish you’d talk to me about these things,” I grumbled.

“I’m sorry,” Brod replied.

I knew the situation had been serious. The others wouldn’t have stayed quiet otherwise, and my master most certainly wouldn’t have lowered his head to anyone. Still, the training had been brutal, but it was fun going back to my roots and learning to do something new again. Torture aside, I chose to believe it did me some good.

I grabbed my master’s hand, stood him up, and addressed everyone. “What my master did, he did for my sake, and you all recognized that. It’s thanks to you guys that I grew through this experience, so let’s call it even.”

“Luciel,” Brod rumbled.

“If the chief says it’s fine, that works for me,” Ketty chimed in. “For the record, though, you two are nuts.”

“This is the first time I’ve seen you undergo such a strict regimen,” Kefin said. “I’m reminded again of how indomitable your spirit is, and I admire it.”

The two were similarly amazed, but in amusingly different ways.

“My master never does anything without a reason, so I trusted him,” I said. “But I’ll admit, I also thought this was a little nuts.” I looked at Brod, but he refused to meet my gaze. He had an awkward air about him. “Master?”

Silence followed until Nadia broke it. “Your bond as teacher and student is strong, yes, but I think things got out of hand. We were restless with worry the entire time.”

“The spirits were too,” Lydia added.

“I apologize for that,” I said. The first thing we had done after they joined us was go train, so I was surprised they weren’t running for the hills. “By the way, what happened after I killed the demon?”

“Well, it’s been half a day since then,” Brod said.

“That long?”

“Right before you cut the thing, it used the last of its strength to launch a

combo spell of both wind and darkness. It tore open tiny holes all over your body.”

“I tried High Heal at the time, but it didn’t do anything,” I remarked.

“That’s because the spell didn’t go away. It just kept ripping you apart, and there’s nothing healing magic can do about it.”

I really had been one step away from death. This had been a very harsh lesson in relying on healing magic too much. Except, without healing magic, fighting got a lot more scary.

Time to change the subject. “I don’t see Estia anywhere.”

“Estia?” my master asked.

He’d lost all memory of the girl, and the others’ memories of her over the last few days were hazy as well. The Spirit of Dusk’s power was probably rebounding again. Only Lydia, the spirit medium, wasn’t affected.

“She’s resting in the next room over,” she answered. “It seems she used too much power. She even went so far as to summon the Spirit of Dawn. Simply reckless, if you ask me.”

Then it was because of Estia—or rather, the Spirit of Dusk—that I’d been holding the hermit key. It must’ve been a pain and a half to somehow get me to summon that from the magic bag.

Could that mean the one stroking my hair earlier had been...Forêt Noire? Using the power of the Spirit of Dawn? Or was Estia double-possessed for a while? All that was certain was that she, the Spirit of Dusk, Forêt, and the Spirit of Dawn deserved my gratitude. For all I knew, I would’ve still been comatose without them.

On a different note, things had ended rather abruptly on account of the aforementioned coma.

“What sort of training are we planning next?” I asked Brod.

All at once, it felt like the air had been sucked out of the room. Lionel grinned. Brod grimaced.

“You’ve got a good enough handle on fighting without your eyes or ears,” the

latter said. “The plan was to start honing those new senses by hopping around more labyrinths.”

“*Was* the plan?”

“We’re still sticking with labyrinths, but instead you’ll be sparring with me or the Lion. Or we’ll do big match-ups with all eight of us.”

“And to what end?” I asked.

“Not for you to win, at least,” he replied. “The goal is to have you learn by watching how the two of us move. With the right focus, you might be able to pull off a decent support role.”

“So, I’m basically shadowing you guys.”

“Something like that. We’ll break things up by hunting monsters to keep you on your toes, push your limits.” A fierce grin spread across his lips. “I made you the strongest healer, and now we’re gonna make you the strongest guy in the whole Church.”

Strangely, it didn’t seem like he was exaggerating. Lionel and the others had already fought the Knights of Shurule, so they knew how high the bar already was. And I had to be ready to raise it.

Still, though, it was hard to ignore the appeal of knocking out those dragon labyrinths with Brod tagging along. With him around, it would be a cakewalk.

“Then let’s take today to relax and start again tomorrow,” I said. “You’re sure everything’s okay at the Merratoni guild?”

“HQ’ll step in if there’s any issues,” Brod replied.

“You mean they’ll make the others pick up the slack.”

“It’ll be fine. I’m staying in touch, and the stampede seems like it’s died down. We’ve only been at it for ten days.”

“Just ten days?” I repeated in shock. “I could’ve sworn it’s been at least half a month. We had forty-six meals and I slept for half a day.”

“Oh, yeah,” Brod said. “I started having you eat five or six times a day at one point. Lack of sleep’s hard on the mind, so I figured I’d trick you by messing with

meal times.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

I remembered getting plenty of sleep regardless. But anyway, when I thought of the fact that I’d actually gotten Detect Presence and Detect Magic all the way to level three in just ten days, it made me think, hey, maybe hell wasn’t so bad.

We talked a bit more, and after turning down an invitation to dinner, everyone left my room. Once they were gone, I opened the hermit key and peeked into the stable. Forêt looked to be sound asleep and exhausted. Unsure of what good it was even doing, I cast Extra Heal and Purification on her, gave her a few pets, and left her alone.

“Starting tomorrow, I’m gonna train hard enough that I’ll be able to at least book it from any enemy. No matter how strong.”

My goal reaffirmed, I ate a massive dinner before falling asleep to ruminations of my new skills.

13 — To the Labyrinth of Wiles

It was still dark when I woke up. Granted, I had slept for half a day already, so an early start was inevitable. I passed the time until sunrise by stretching and practicing my magic control.

“Man,” I muttered, “I love being able to see.”

I exited my room and met Kefin outside.

“Good morning,” I greeted him.

“Good morning, sir,” he replied with a smile.

What a trustworthy guy, I thought to myself. “Out of curiosity, what were you guys up to for those ten days I was training?” I asked. “Sparring?”

“Yes, sir. It was intense work. After you shut your ears, we started doing technique drills.”

“My master lit fires under both our butts at the same time, huh? Sounds like him.”

“In a manner of speaking, I suppose,” he chuckled. “Your healing was a great help with the exhaustion. For me especially, sir.”

“I’m glad. I was a little worried about Master and Lionel, though. I can’t imagine the exercises they had you do were...orthodox.”

“No, sir, I’d certainly not describe them as such.”

We shared knowing grins. Training under those two and calling it anything but “hell” was doing them a disservice.

“I’m sure Master did his research on the ant labyrinth before sending us into it, at least. And I’m willing to bet he did a lot to thin the numbers first too,” I said.

“Yes, sir. He was very thorough with every bit of information. Almost excessively so, and he seemed a bit impatient. He’d harshen our training if any

of us laughed at him.”

So which was he, a protective father figure or Satan? It seemed his primary source of anxiety was being caught showing human emotion.

I started to head over to see Estia but figured it would be too early and turned back to Kefin. “Do you think I should wait before paying Estia a visit?”

“Yes, sir. She’s sharing a room with Ketty and the sisters, so I think it would be best for you to check in on her later if she isn’t at breakfast.”

I expected as much. “I see. Anything else I should know?”

“No, sir.”

Before leaving, I decided to take the opportunity to ask something that had been on my mind. “I know you’ve been with us since Yenice, but what do you think about all this dragon and spirit nonsense? Are you okay with all the running around, freeing deities from labyrinths?”

“It doesn’t bother me, sir. If anything, it excites me. Your master wanted to pass his skills on when he learned his time was drawing near, and in much the same way, I want to be there to see you become something great.”

There was a fire in his eyes. Brod wanting to “pass on” things to me made me a little anxious, but I couldn’t forget that I wasn’t alone. I had many people like Kefin who were willing to help me.

“I guess I’m glad to hear that,” I said. “Just don’t expect writing my memoirs to be very interesting.”

“I think that’s up to future generations to decide. I simply want to be the record.”

“If you say so.”

Would it be kinda neat to leave behind a legacy like Lord Reinstar? Sure. But writing a good story meant there had to be all sorts of crazy plot twists and set pieces.

We headed to the mess hall, where we discussed perception skills at length while waiting on everyone else. He told me he couldn’t actually sense magic, and he got by with smell and basic presence sensing. Apparently, every race

had its strong and weak points. Some of them utilized skills in very different ways. It was clear from our discussion that Kefin had a very open mind and was hungry for knowledge (something I could probably learn from).

“So, about Ketty,” I said.

“I’ll get back to you on that if we ever make it back to Yenice,” he replied with a bashful smile. “She wants to talk to Nalia.”

I still couldn’t believe he had made *Ketty* fall for him. I had to keep him in mind if I was ever in need of a love master.

“I can free you whenever you want. Just remember that I’d like it if you stuck around. You’re even more of an asset than the Order of Healing.”

“Thank you, sir.”

After that, the others started to trickle in. Fortunately, even Estia eventually appeared.

“Do we have any candidates for where to start our training?” I asked Brod.

“Those sisters might not like it, but I was thinkin’ the Labyrinth of Wiles,” he replied.

I had one question: why? We had already freed the dragon, leaving only the core to worry about, and frankly, I preferred to keep my distance. That thing was a weapon that could summon the Wicked One. No, thanks. I was cool with never seeing one again.

“Why?” I asked, this time out loud.

“Because it’s the best for leveling up. And going all out against a few monsters is just what me and the Lion need to shake the last of this dust off.”

“I share this request,” Lionel added. “Not as your subordinate, but as a warrior.”

I couldn’t very well turn *both* of them down, and everyone else was in agreement, so I went along with it. All we had to do was not touch the dang core. There was just Nadia and Lydia to consider.

“What do you two want to do?” I asked them. “Are you joining us or is this

where we part ways?" I couldn't force them to come along. Not after everything they'd been through in that very labyrinth.

They looked at each other for a moment, nodded together, then looked back at me. "We would like to join you," Nadia said. "We feel that being with you is our path to greatness as adventurers."

Lydia added nothing. Their gazes were confident.

"Well, be ready to keep a dozen extra eyes out for traps, Kefin," I said. "Ketty, be ready to lend a hand."

"Yes, sir." Kefin replied.

"Yessir," Ketty yipped.

"Estia, thank you for yesterday." I lowered my head. "Your partnership is greatly valued."

"O-Oh, um," she stammered, taken aback. "Right. Thank you."

I really did want her to fit in with the rest of us. And so our plans were decided.

When we stepped outside, I realized we were in Aecius. Once I recovered from the mild shock, we stocked up on food again, then departed for the Labyrinth of Wiles. For real this time.

Forêt still wasn't back to normal, so she was on indefinite sick leave. As I sat in the carriage, looking out at the scenery for the first time in over a week, I found that I'd kind of forgotten how to use my eyes. It felt oddly awkward.

Suddenly, Nadia pulled out my Holy Dragon spear and Illusion Sword from her magic bag and handed them to me.

"Thanks, but, uh, why do you have these?" I asked.

"Everyone else was repelled by the dragons' power. I managed to pick it up, but it didn't seem I could actually use it, so I stowed it in my bag," she replied.

"Appreciated."

I imbued them both with magic, and they glowed white, then scarlet, then brown, and finally yellow rings of light appeared before fading away. So, I was

the only one who could wield them. Nice. That was pretty cool, and it was hard to keep myself from smiling like a kid. But we still had half a day to go until we got to the labyrinth. I closed my eyes to calm down before I blew a fuse early on.

I extended my awareness, sensing the magical energy and presences of those around me. Perhaps getting this down would lend itself to acquiring a skill for enemy detection. My senses reached out further until I picked up the faint auras of what I thought were...maybe possibly monsters. But they were vanishing fast.

Unsure if I was even doing it right, I peeked into the driver's seat to ask Kefin. Just then, I caught Brod and Lionel in the middle of what looked like a monster-slaying contest.

I had my answer.

We bounced along the road for six hours straight with me casting High Heal on the horses to keep them going as we passed numerous towns and villages on the way.

My first words upon seeing the labyrinth were, "Okay, what?"

Right there, where the map said a labyrinth was supposed to be, was a friggin' mountain.

"This doesn't make sense," Nadia said. "This used to be a cavern. There was never any mountain here."

She looked at her sister for confirmation, but Lydia seemed out of sorts.

"I can...hear it," Lydia muttered. She started walking off.

"Let's follow her," Nadia said at once. "This might be spirit-related. Maybe we'll find some answers."

I decided I didn't want to hike over a mountain and trailed behind Lydia as Nadia suggested. As we traced the base of it, we were attacked by flying monsters, which Brod and Lionel made a contest of hunting again. Lydia, however, hardly reacted and continued on as if in a stupor.

“Estia, can you hear anything?” I asked.

“No voice specifically,” she replied, “but I can feel a very strong spiritual presence.”

So we pressed on, guarding Lydia the whole way.

“Whatever happened here must be the cause of all these monsters,” Brod said. “And I’m pretty sure this is the mountain that shoulda been on the border of Merratoni.”

“Then we can expect there to be some nasty monsters, can’t we?” I asked.

“Strong ones. Like the one that nearly wiped out the Lineage. Something’s goin’ on, but this could be fun.”

Nadia froze upon hearing that her former teachers had nearly died once. I remembered that time. The Lineage of the White Wolf had been carried back to Merratoni, one foot in the grave, and there had been no system in place to heal their conditions at the time, though I’d ended up saving them. It was crazy to think about how long ago that was.

After an hour of tailing Lydia, I started to smell something sulfuric. Hot springs came to mind first, but there shouldn’t have been any of those around. Granted, it had been a long time since I’d studied up on volcanic groundwater locations, but the vast stretch of forest didn’t seem like prime real estate for one.

Still, the characteristic smell was getting to me, and Ketty and Kefin seemed to be in particular pain, being beastpeople. I handed them noseplugs.

All of a sudden, bursts of steam erupted from the ground, clouding our vision. We must have been near a geyser.

“Be careful, everyone,” I called out. “Area Barrier can’t protect you against heat. Don’t burn yourselves.”

Lydia knelt down and languidly put her hand to the ground. A crimson magic circle appeared around her, summoning a small bird engulfed in fire.



The creature looked almost pitiful, but even I could feel how powerful its mere presence was. Nadia went to hold her sister as she began to collapse.

"I am the Spirit of Inferno, chosen of the Elemental, bearer of the spirits' blessings, and host of the Spirit of Dusk. Well met," a voice echoed in my head, firm and resolute. Somehow, I knew it was coming from the bird before us.

"Great Spirit, I assume you used the Elemental's chosen to call us here against her will for an urgent reason," I said.

"I appreciate one who gets to the point, blessing bearer," it said. *"You see, this mountain was transported here as I slumbered."*

"Transported?"

"Indeed. A feat only possible by powerful demons or with godly strength. Curiously, however, I sense traces of neither."

Well, if it hadn't been godly *strength*, then what about *a* god? Say, the Wicked One? Actually, never mind. Let sleeping dogs lie, as they say.

"Just to let you know, we humans aren't very adept at destroying or moving mountains," I said. "We're only here for the labyrinth."

"I ask you to do nothing of the sort. Transporting something back whence it came is actually a simple matter when done quickly enough."

In which case, there was only one thing left that we could possibly do.

"You want us to share our magic with you?"

"Precisely," the spirit replied. *"Rest assured, this is not a selfish request. Such a drastic change in landscape would cause great unbalance in the natural world, thus altering the stream of power that flows throughout this planet."*

Translation: something bad would happen.

"Okay, so how do we stop that?"

"First, take my blessing. Raise your hands high and place them gently together."

I did so hesitantly. When my hands were touching, I heard that familiar *ping*.

Title Obtained: Protection of the Spirit of Inferno

Was it weird that the easier I received these blessings, the more nervous I felt? Well, it turned out I was right to be worried.

“Brace yourself.”

The spirit touched my outstretched hands, and it began to grow until it well and truly resembled the legendary phoenix. I felt none of the weight or heat, perhaps thanks to the blessing, but needless to say I was less protected from the shock. When I glanced at the others, Estia and Lydia (having returned to her senses) were similarly in awe, but everyone else was focused on me. I’d nearly forgotten that only the spirits’ kin could perceive them.

Eventually, my magic was drained to near empty, and my knees buckled a little. The spirit only stopped once my magic was below ten percent, then it shrieked. Light engulfed the mountain, and the next moment it was gone.

“Chosen of the Elemental, train well so that one day you might be worthy of being my liege,” it said. *“I await the day you call on me, blessing bearer.”*

And just like that, the phoenix, spirit, bird-whatever disappeared. I immediately fell to my knees.

Moving that mountain had to have taken spacetime magic, but I guess anything was on the table for a spirit. On that note, it had said that transporting the mountain back was simple when done quickly, despite half a month having passed since it had first been teleported. Clearly, we didn’t have the same sense of time (or scale, for that matter). I also realized something else: that kind of power was not meant for mortal hands.

I caught my breath before filling everyone in on what had just happened.

Brod nodded, rubbing his stubble. “So, what you’re sayin’ is, it’s gonna take two days to get back to Merratoni like normal again.”

“If everything’s back to the way it was,” I replied.

“Not like we can complain about a spirit rightin’ wrongs, I guess, so no point cryin’ about it.”

He was awfully understanding. Almost like spirit and dragon antics in this world were in the same league as natural disasters. I figured I ought to have been grateful to the spirit for fixing our problem, though.

“The view’s a lot better with the mountain out of the way,” I said.

We’d walked off course for about an hour, so the labyrinth entrance was nowhere to be seen. It wouldn’t be hard to make our way back, though.

“All right, no more wastin’ time,” Brod said. He started off the way we’d come. “Let’s head back.”

I turned to Lydia, who seemed to be in pain. “That was a little rude of the spirit, but its powers really are incredible. How’s your magic?”

“Low,” she replied. “Just a little magical exhaustion, that’s all.”

“Need a potion?”

She shook her head. “Just a short break.”

“We’ll stop for food before heading into the labyrinth. Nadia, can you go over the monsters and traps you remember coming across during your expedition inside?”

“Of course,” the older sister replied.

With the mountain gone, no monsters attacked on the trek back, and we reached the labyrinth’s entrance quickly. We had an early lunch there while Nadia and Lydia described their experiences and encounters. Combined with Brod’s preliminary research, we managed to get a fairly comprehensive picture of the dungeon.

Armed with this knowledge, we stepped inside.

To no one’s surprise, the labyrinth was riddled with traps. But the most annoying thing was that even after disarming them, they’d reappear some time later. This wasn’t going to be easy, but people had supposedly cleared the dungeon before, so it was by no means impossible. The real question was whether we could be the first to do it with no casualties.

At least, that was what I’d come to expect. Kefin and Brod, however, made

short work of the traps, and we never met so much as a single monster.

“The halls here look a lot more distorted than in other labyrinths,” I noted. “I wonder if monsters only show up around here by triggering traps.”

Nadia and Lydia, having experienced this themselves, nodded pensively. We hadn’t even made it past floor five yet, to be fair, but still. If all the dragons’ labyrinths had been like this, it would’ve been fine by me. At the same time, there was no denying that intense energy I’d been sensing. I wouldn’t have been surprised if it was coming from a demon.

“We were on floor fifteen when a trap sent us to a hydra’s lair,” Nadia said. “I’m certain that any monsters present won’t be weak.”

The sisters were putting on strong faces, but they couldn’t hide their trembling entirely. What they had gone through had certainly been traumatic. Personally, I found the fact that they were here at all impressive, and I didn’t expect them to do much fighting.

Soon, the last obstacle standing between us and the tenth floor boss room was disarmed.

“The main chambers here are supposed to be random. We’ll have to be ready for anything,” Brod said. “You good, Luciel?”

No point strategizing, then. I resolved to take the front and enter the room first.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Let’s hope it’s an undead-type.”

I opened the door. Weapon at the ready, we crept towards the center of the room and were met with our enemy: a king wraith. Poor thing. I free cast Purification, and it was gone in a brief flash of light.

“Easy,” I said, smirking. “Master, Kefin, if you please.”

Brod sighed, the others smiled wearily, and the sisters were stunned, frozen in place.

“Don’t forget we’re here to fight,” my master said wearily.

We continued to encounter no monsters as we pressed on, but the labyrinth more than made up for that in traps. I even tried my hand at removing a few of

them. In general, things were going smoothly.

When we reached the fifteenth floor, Brod turned to the sisters. “Wanna overcome your trauma?” he asked. “We could get rid of that hydra. It’d be no trouble with all of us here.”

The girls turned pale but nodded nonetheless. The trap that would transport us to the hydra’s room wasn’t far from where we were.

“Won’t be so bad falling for a booby trap if there’s a monster waiting on the other side,” Brod thought aloud.

“Not to rain on your parade,” I said, “but please try not to die.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“That goes for the rest of you.”

Everyone nodded. No one was going to die here, including me. No matter what. Repeating that promise in my head, we followed the sisters as they guided us to the trap, and we leaped in together.

Everything went black for a moment, but when my vision returned, a hydra stood some twenty meters away. It leered at its prey and roared, almost as if in joy. The walls quaked and my ears rang as the howl echoed. But a headache was all it caused me.

“Five heads? Fine with me. I like having options,” I said tauntingly.

The monster fixed its gaze on me and lunged forward. At a glance, it resembled a multi-headed dragon without wings, but it wasn’t nearly as intimidating. The largest threat, I deduced, would be breath attacks, and those would likely be a mixture of elements. All I could think was that the Flame Dragon had been scarier.

I swiftly cast Area Barrier on everyone and analyzed their movements, paying special attention to where Brod and Lionel would be, then equipped myself with the Holy Dragon spear in my right hand and the Illusion Sword in my left. Suddenly, the hydra stopped, eyeing me and my master warily. I’d forgotten that Brod was a dragonslayer just like me. We exchanged glances, and he approached me.

“Listen up,” said Brod. “Hydras typically fight from long range with their breath, and they’ll usually shoot two or three at a time. The only other things you should keep your eyes on are its teeth and that tail.”

“What about its claws?” I asked.

“It won’t bother while it’s spitting its breath at you. You wanna stick to its flanks as much as possible. Limits the number of heads that can be on your ass. Watch.”

I blinked and he was gone before reappearing at the hydra’s side and making himself its target. He baited out a breath attack, smoothly dodged it, and opened a gash on the beast’s thick right leg, near the base. Kicking off from the head snapping at him, he returned to my side once more.

“Also, the heads grow back,” he added nonchalantly. “And be careful, because sometimes they’ll follow fire breath with petrifying breath.” He addressed Lionel. “Lion, I’m gonna lob off some heads before they give us any more trouble. Burn ’em for me.”

Well, that had been a dozen kinds of unhelpful. No way I could do what he’d just pulled off. I couldn’t really say so out loud when he was in this kind of mood, though. He’d tell me I needed to try things before deciding I couldn’t do them. Still, my objective was to shadow, so I made it my goal to at least follow and understand his maneuvers. That was the most I could hope for when my teacher was probably one of the world’s best.

“Try to keep up so I don’t accidentally incinerate you,” Lionel joked.

“Do you know who I am?” Brod shot back with a grin. “I’m gonna leave one for you.”

My master vanished and reappeared on the opposite flank this time, slicing the monster’s left leg and tossing something from his coat pocket. Suddenly, the room was filled with a blinding light. A flash-bang?

Before I could process the breakneck chain of events, Lionel activated his flaming greatsword and flourished it precisely four times at an almost imperceptible speed. Four large balls of fire then sped off through the air. They impacted four neck stumps that had lost their heads, exploding in a chorus of

roaring fire.

And then Brod was next to me again, smiling. “See? Always focus on the flanks. Safer that way.”

I was baffled. There had been a flash of light, and then four heads were just gone. Absolutely stupefied and at a loss for what to say, I settled on an awkward smile. And clearly, I wasn’t the only one taken aback by their display.

After seeing something like that, I wondered why Brod had given up adventuring for what essentially amounted to a desk job. I had heard it was to bring up the next generation of adventurers, but that didn’t feel like the whole story. In the same vein, if this was Brod when he was “rusty,” what had the guy been like in his prime?

My train of thought was interrupted by the angry howl of a now-one-headed hydra, still very much intent on fighting.

“Dealing damage’ll level you up,” Brod remarked. “And if you beat it, you get to be a dragonslayer. So go on, everyone give it a good scrap.”

I supposed that meant I had to take the lead. “Watch the breath,” I ordered. “We don’t know how extensive its head-regenerating abilities are, so keep the damage to its limbs or necks. Whatever you do, don’t let it hit you with its breath head-on!”

The others sounded off, and the attack began. Lydia, wielding her spirit staff, mumbled a few words, summoning spears of fire and wind that hurled towards the hydra. Whether out of pain or rage over being attacked by a lesser being, the monster let out a fierce roar. Unfazed, I threw my magically-imbued spear at it. It sank straight into the beast’s chest, angering it further.

The hydra honed in on me in its fury, and I readied myself to avoid its dangerous breath as I sensed its malice swell, but instead it spun in place and swung its tail at me. Estia and Nadia were also in its path, so Ketty and Kefin sprinted up the wall, almost to the ceiling, kicked off, and dug their blades into the monster’s still-fresh wounds. This slowed our enemy long enough for the three of us to avoid its tail.

Ketty stole the monster’s attention next, and it reared back to unleash its

breath at her—a second too late. Estia and Nadia planted their weapons into the hydra's wounded arms, and before it could finish inhaling, I had cleaved through its defenseless neck with the strength Physical Enhancement afforded me. Thrusting in my spear for the finishing blow, the hydra stumbled back a few steps before collapsing and promptly vanishing, leaving behind a magic stone.

This was probably the first time we'd taken down a monster like a real party. But then I realized I already had the Dragonslayer title. Crap. I probably should have let someone else get the finishing blow. Oh well. I decided to prioritize celebrating our success.

It felt like Brod had done more than simply train me since our reunion. Even Lionel seemed stronger than before. I wasn't sure about being able to replicate their level of reality-defying strength, but maybe by the end of this I could get a little closer.

At the end of that road was a peaceful life waiting for me.

14 — Random Bosses

We'd defeated the hydra. That was great...until it wasn't.

The magic circle that had transported us there didn't work anymore, so we were forced to hop into the circle the sisters had fled through. And its destination? Why, the start of the dungeon, of course.

"This would actually be a good spot to grind trap detection and disarming skills," I murmured thoughtfully.

"You studied trap disarming back in Merratoni, didn't you?" Brod asked. "Now's a good chance to teach you properly." He patted my shoulder. I would've made a great gravedigger considering how good I was at digging holes for myself.

My master announced that our goal for the rest of the day was to reach the tenth floor. After watching him and Kefin deal with so many traps on our first run, I was feeling pretty confident. Oh, how very wrong I was.

The dungeon was littered with contraptions, of course, but quality had not been sacrificed for the sake of quantity. Many of them were complicated, and they took me a long time to figure out. Aside from pitfalls and teleportation circles, there were also ones that would paralyze you or shoot poisoned arrows or needles, and frankly, it was tempting to just tank through it all.

I wasn't willing to tempt fate today, though. I was no stranger to the ways it liked to prove me wrong. So I instead occupied my mind with searching for fluctuations in the labyrinth's mana.

I lost track of time, but when we finally reached the tenth floor, I was absolutely starving. Brod had interrupted our progress numerous times, and if it hadn't been for the efforts of our party's kind women, I would have lost my patience. Even if it felt like my master had planned for all of it.

Without so much as offering a break, Brod went and opened the door to the

boss room, so there was no backing out now. Greeting us this time was an enormous robot-like golem.

“Master, that thing is spitting lightning,” I said exasperatedly.

Well, technically it was electricity, but that didn’t change the fact that it looked like a bucket of water would make the thing short-circuit. Before I could ask Lydia if she could oblige with some spirit magic, Brod stepped forward.

“Not worth the trouble. Be right back.”

He sprinted towards the construct, and it fired an arc of electricity at him so powerful that it was visible to the naked eye. It was too slow for Brod, though. He stabbed a single point on the golem numerous times, and by the time he landed back on the ground, it had crumbled into a single magic stone.

“What the heck was that?” I asked.

“Golems and slimes have cores,” Lionel answered first. “Destroying that prevents them from maintaining their physical form. The Whirlwind deduced its likely location and eliminated it with a quick flurry of strikes.”

That theory made sense. Except I still didn’t know how I was supposed to copy that nonsense. Even Ketty and Kefin looked terrified of my master. Seriously, that guy existed on a whole other plane from the rest of us.

“We’ll camp out here tonight,” he said. “Do some sparring once we’ve had something to eat.”

“Right...” I moaned.

I was beginning to wonder whether having that freak of nature around was good luck or bad. Then again, the impossibly large gap between our abilities made it easier to get over it and just go with the flow.

I purified the boss room and unpacked the cooking equipment. Estia and the sisters could cook, so we made fast progress. Noticing Ketty eyeing us from afar, I called her over and asked the others to help her find her way around the kitchen. She’d never wanted to go anywhere near a knife that wasn’t meant for fighting before, but perhaps her interests had changed and she wanted to treat Kefin to some homemade meals. I could only assume I was right when the man

himself came to bow in thanks to me, which made me chuckle.

I wouldn't be laughing for long, though.

"Come at me as hard as you can, and then I'll counter-attack. Make sure you've got barrier magic up, 'cause I'll knock you clean out without it."

The fact that he wasn't sucker-punching me was a nice change, but I realized before long that things hadn't changed all that much after all.

My first match with Brod was unarmed. I was supposed to hit him with everything I had, Physical Enhancement and all, but the moment I did, a counter would be waiting for me. For every punch, there was an equal and opposite one—yeah, right. It was always way more than equal.

Once he'd handed my butt to me, he would teach me more about weapons that fit my combat style, a little more detailed this time than before. Swordsmanship, spear work, dual wielding, hand-to-hand—he explained the weak and strong points of all different modes of fighting in between smacking me around.

"Earlier, you learned how to sense your opponents and predict their movements," he lectured. "The fact that you managed that in half a month speaks to the strong foundation you had."

"A compliment? From *you*?" I said in surprise.

"I acknowledge hard work when I see it. But it's not just about that this time. It's your character too. Someone without your sharp sense for danger, your unwavering dedication, could never have pulled it off without cracking."

My very first nickname suddenly flashed through my mind. That horrible, horrible name. "Are you okay? Was there something funny in the food?" I asked.

"You know what I think?" His eyes burned with passion. "I don't think you could learn to anticipate a fight ten steps ahead. I think you could anticipate *twenty*."

What was he expecting from me? To explicitly bait out counters so that I

could counter them with my *own* counter? What was I, some kind of galaxy-brain mastermind?

“I’m just going to attack now.”

Activating Physical Enhancement and casting High Heal at the same time, I lunged forward. The next instant, my back met with the hard ground.

“Suicide attacks have their place in strategy, Luciel, but they aren’t always the answer,” he said. “*Watch* your opponent. See how they move. Keep those perception skills active and envision the fight. That’s how you’ll improve.”

It was starting to feel like I was in some shonen manga. How realistic was it, *really*, for me to overcome my utter lack of talent? Wait. It was a skill, wasn’t it?

“*Middle Heal*,” I incanted to soothe my pain. “It sounds like you want me to learn how to use precognition and see the future.”

“You’re not far off. It’s an ability only a handful of gifted people have, but I don’t believe for a second that talent’s some kinda insurmountable obstacle that average folk like you or me can’t surpass.”

“But how?”

“Seeing action. Getting experience. That’s something you can manage, right?”

“So it comes down to stubborn tenacity,” I murmured.

“Granted, you’ll have to stay on your toes. Slack for a second and you’ll get passed up by someone it comes easier to.” He scratched his head awkwardly.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t very convinced by his lumping me in the same league as him. In fact, what was that about? He’d called himself “average folk.”

“Master, you included yourself when you said ‘average,’” I said. “Why?”

“I’m gonna tell you something. See, I wanted to be an imperial soldier when I was a kid. But when I turned fifteen, I failed the enlistment exam. That’s why I wound up adventuring.”

“Wait, you’re *Illumasian*?”

“Raised but not born there,” he corrected me. “It’s not important. I was stuck in E-rank till I was twenty when I met an S-rank party. One of ’em, an old

geezer, ended up being my master. Know what he did? He whooped my ass. Bastard spent five years whipping me into shape, giving me nerves of steel. By the end of it, S-rank wasn't a dream anymore. That's why I chose you as my apprentice, Luciel. It's not about talent. It's about dedication."

I was speechless. It was almost unbelievable. Suddenly, memories of my past life came flooding back. One of my coworkers who'd joined the company around the same time as me had been one of their most promising up-and-comers. But three years in, he'd lost steam and his performance dropped until he finally quit.

Then I remembered myself. How I'd struggled to get ahead or show any results beyond the bare minimum. My coworker had been smart, well-spoken, respected, and he had made enough of an impression at the company to rise through the ranks. At my own three-year mark, I had still been floundering with my clients like a newbie.

I was the tortoise and he was the hare.

But I'd never given up. I'd solved more client cases than anyone, remembered their quirks and needs, and expanded my range of business partners. Eventually, those clients had started to introduce me to even more clients, and all of a sudden everything had changed.

That was it. That had been my moment of success, and I had owed it to one of my coworker friends, my bosses, for showing me the way. Much like Brod was doing for me now.

Maybe I was dumb for thinking so, but I couldn't help but relate deeply to my master's past. It resembled my own. Granted, he hadn't been pushing pencils, and I hadn't been fighting monsters, but the lesson was the same, regardless of the world. The main difference was that with the right amount of effort, anyone could be anything they wanted in this one.

I had certainly been blessed, quite literally in this case, so maybe it wasn't fair to compare my privileged perspective to the years of work people like Brod had put in. Still, I had to ask myself, what was it that got my Holy Magic skill to level ten? Had my gift done that or had I? Personally, I wanted to believe the latter. And in the same way, Brod had put in the effort, trained, and defeated the

monsters that made him who he was. No one else had done it for him.

I found myself wishing I could pass all this on to the next generation back in Yenice. Still, that was all nebulous dedication talk. My current problem was much more physical, and its name was “training.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said. “But let’s also take it easy and not forget I’m a healer.”

“First, we’ll hone your technique with a weapon. Then we’ll focus on your perception skills so you get a better feel for combat. That’ll be a solid base for you to grasp the battlefield and start takin’ the front lines.”

“This is starting to sound like boot camp.”

“We’ve gotta haul your ass all the way to the limits of a healer and beyond. You won’t want for nothin’ when you’re strong.”

Well. He had a point there. “I can’t argue with that,” I admitted. “Guess I need to buckle down and get to it.”

“That was...easier than I thought.”

“You taught me well. Time spent arguing is time I could be spending trying to get a hit in on you.”

“I’ll knock your ass out before you get the chance,” Brod rumbled.

“Gently, please.”

We trained until I couldn’t anymore, and then Lionel stepped in and we trained some more. At the end of it all, I cast Purification on everyone and we called it there. It had been a long time since I’d last...well, trained for real. And it kind of felt...good?

Terrified of the implications that thought presented, I took out my angel’s pillow and went to sleep.

I woke up first the next morning, but by the time I had finished cooking, everyone else was up as well. Breakfast was simple—french toast topped with vespian honey and some hamburgers (because I felt like it). The girls asked for the french toast recipe, so I showed them Gulgar and Grantz’s recipe list, which I hadn’t used in forever. It was a lively meal.

Refreshed after a night's rest and a good breakfast, we resumed our training-slash-labyrinth exploration. Kefin and Brod continued to teach me about disarming traps as we went, which slowed our pace, so Lionel and the others began to occupy themselves with their own training. Lionel practiced controlling the fireballs from his greatsword while Lydia shot out spells and Nadia cut them down. Ketty and Estia, however, simply chatted.

Brod scanned our map while I fiddled with one of the traps. "Is it accurate?" I asked.

"It better be, for ten gold," he huffed. "Traps aren't the only things that regenerate in this place. Treasure chests do too. We shouldn't be getting lost, but chances are pretty low we'll come across anything big."

"Don't worry, I'm pretty lucky." *Thanks, Monsieur Luck.*

"Maybe we'll make out like bandits, then."

"If we don't, I'll buy you a beer or something."

"Don't threaten me with a good time."

We proceeded without incident to the twentieth floor, where Lionel opened the door and found a cyclops inside.

"You were right," Brod said. "You do have good luck."

"How is this good?" I demanded. The monstrous eye was one thing, but it was easily over ten meters tall with a body burly enough to support such gargantuan stature. Apparently, it could also shoot laser beams and increase its defense with magic, and it was exceptionally agile. "The way I see it, you and Lionel are bringing us *bad* luck."

Of course, to a pair of battle-crazed lunatics, perhaps a colossal cyclops on the same level as a red dragon was reason for celebration.

"I will handle this one," said Lionel.

I didn't want to take any chances, so I gave him his shield and cast Area Barrier for good measure. He thanked me, then slowly approached the monster.

"We really shouldn't let him go out there alone."

Before I could order everyone to move in, Brod grabbed my shoulder. “The Lion won’t go down to that small fry. Just watch. Not that it’ll do ya much good.”

I trusted Brod’s judgment, of course, but still readied myself to throw out healing magic at any time. Ketty stood next to me, looking on, just as worried yet resolute.

Lionel paced towards the cyclops unwaveringly, and once he was within arm’s reach, the monster brought down its giant limb. The general took the blow lazily with his shield, the ground crumbling beneath his feet from the impact, but the man himself was unscathed. It was the last attack the cyclops would ever make with that hand, because it was severed an instant later.

The creature roared in pain, swinging its undamaged arm at Lionel from the side. Again, it stopped at Lionel’s shield, and the ground caved in a little more. That hand was the next to go. The cyclops brought its foot down next only to be dodged and receive a deep gash in its ankle. It came toppling down.

Lionel turned around. “Does anyone care to receive the Giant Buster title?”

As tempting as it was, I decided to just get a quick cheap shot in for the experience. Was I level leeching? Absolutely. But this wasn’t a video game, so screw it.

After that, Lionel lopped off its head, and the fight was over.

We took a quick snack break, then pushed on in silence, never spotting any sign of monsters. When we reached the thirtieth floor boss room, my Trap Sensing and Disarming skills had both gone up by two.

I opened the door to our future campsite. Inside was a headless horseman on a black stallion. A dullahan, I guessed. I tried Sanctuary Circle first in case it was undead, but to no effect, unfortunately. It seemed dullahans were more on the fae side of things.

Brod and Lionel stood behind me, arms crossed, meaning it was up to the rest of us. I looked at the others. I was still too weak to take this thing on my own.

“Ketty, Kefin, harass its flanks,” I ordered them. “Lydia, I want you to support us with your spirit magic. Estia and Nadia, help me take out that mount.”

I cast Area Barrier, and then something amazing happened. Ketty and Kefin, who had pushed ahead, had already unseated the dullahan from its horse. Lydia fired her spells while her sister and Estia pierced the steed. Moments later, both it and its rider disintegrated into two magic stones.

It all happened so fast that the rest of us looked a little confused.

“Did Sanctuary Circle weaken it?” I wondered aloud. “Or was there something that affects sprite-type monsters in general?”

I turned to Brod and Lionel for answers, but they just gave me that look I’d gotten after taking out the king wraith. And then I realized what was happening.

I was subsequently banned from opening any more boss doors from then on.

15 — The Whirlwind Versus the Lion

I woke up first again, so I made breakfast like last time, though all the process consisted of was taking leftovers out of my bag. Still, having food ready and waiting in the morning was a nice privilege.

After breakfast, Brod said we would continue to make this floor the base of our training. All of us, excluding him and Lionel, were apparently going to have one-on-one sparring matches, but really it ended up being a big sumo match, where four of us had to throw each other out of a ring while Lydia shot spells at us. What made it challenging was the fact that holding the opponent for longer than three seconds was not allowed.

Eventually, I realized the point of this was to get me to think about reach and how my own field of range differed from someone else's. Despite it feeling a little weird, it was a little like the philosophy behind aikido—rather than trying to directly *oppose* your opponent, break their balance by matching their “flow,” so to speak. I had to use the enemy's own weight against them and force them out of the ring, all while dodging Lydia's attacks. But the enemy wouldn't stand still, so I had to be able to think ahead and keep my wits about me. Nothing really hurt, though, so it ended up being pretty fun.

After that, it was back to normal sparring, although everyone but Brod and Lionel were practically walking corpses, so I soothed them with High Heal. Once all was said and done, however, and the day was over, my master said something that I would never forget.

“Well, that was a fun day off. We're getting back to work tomorrow.”

We woke up the next morning, had breakfast, and set out for the fortieth floor. Difficult traps that I couldn't solve on my own started to show up more, so our pace improved as Brod and Kefin took over handling them again.

Yet, all our caution went to waste when we approached the fourth boss room without having met a single monster. Again.

“Are we going in?” I asked my master. “You said floor thirty would be our base, and we might not be able to turn back.”

“I don’t feel like disarming all those traps again, so we’ll make this our new campsite,” he replied. “Don’t worry, we won’t go any deeper.” He pushed open the door.

“Uh...”

“What? We gotta open it. We’ll get some good training and level-ups here.”

He left no more room for argument as he walked inside. Would I finally get to see him and Lionel have their match after this? I followed him, the excitement building.

The monster inside was a part-lion, part-goat, part-snake, winged chimera, and it looked a lot more ferocious than the one I’d seen a few weeks ago. According to what I had heard, they could attack with their breath, fangs, or razor-sharp claws. They could also petrify you and fly through the air at will. Honestly, I was starting to think a griffin or wyvern would’ve been the easier opponent.

I cast Area Barrier on everyone and awaited Brod’s instructions, but he was already gone. Thinking in annoyance that he probably should’ve *waited* for once, I took some distance to give me a wide field of view and made sure I was ready to cast healing magic at any time. Just in case, I also handed Lydia a magic satchel of poison-curing herbs I’d procured from the Doctor’s Guild. Not that it’d affect me, but the snake was probably venomous, the goat had electric attacks, and the lion could breathe fire.

The room was square and a little cramped for such a battle. It would have been easy to get caught up in the enemy’s tempo, but we couldn’t do anything without knowing how Brod would make his move.

At that moment, he threw another flash-bang from his coat, and the next instant the goat’s head was gone.

I didn’t waste time. “*Recover!*”

The snake head was on the other side, unaffected by the flash, and I had seen it snap at my master. Where had he even gotten those things, and why didn’t I

have some?

A lull in the fight came, which Lionel used to launch a fireball from his sword. But fire? Against a fire-breathing monster? Yet somehow, when the attack landed, and the chimera inhaled it and tried to unleash its breath, nothing came out.

Brod appeared behind it and decapitated it in an instant, making the beast explode. The fireball had only been meant to draw its attention so that Brod could land the final blow. That was the sort of teamwork only longtime friends could pull off.

The explosion had been small, but I cast High Heal on my master anyway. Then, he turned around and ran right back to us, leaving the viper end behind.

“Got a bit carried away there,” he said. “Flying snake’s all yours.”

“All right, let’s do it, guys,” I called out.

I wasn’t happy about it, but if I didn’t keep my act together, a monster like this would easily kill me. Eventually, we took it down.

“Levels and stats don’t mean shit if you can’t use ’em properly,” Brod lectured us. “Keep fighting, and really look for the monsters’ weak points.”

“Yes, sir,” we all replied at once.

We had to keep our spirits high if we didn’t want him or Lionel to leave us in the dust.

During a break after several fights, I decided to ask my master, “The monsters here are way more powerful than any I’ve fought against in any other labyrinth. Why is that?”

“It’s probably our fault,” he answered.

“You mean, you and Lionel?”

“The monsters that show up in the main chambers here seem to change depending on the level of whoever opens the door. That chimera pretty much confirmed it,” Brod explained. “So when Lionel or I open a door, a strong monster comes out. When you open one, something weak shows up.”

Oh, so a king wraith and a dullahan were weak. Noted.

“Then it’s randomized?”

“The monsters are always different. Sometimes they’re pushovers for you, sometimes they’re not.”

That was why mine had been undead-types. Well, except for the dullahan, but aside from that. Thanks again, Monsieur Luck.

“Sounds like a handy place for leveling up.”

“Exactly. Perfect spot to train in.”

I only smiled awkwardly. “I just want to actually be able to follow the way you fight.”

“You’re still too rigid in how you think,” he chided me. “You’ll get it the more you practice, and the better you get at sensing, which you should still be working on, by the way.” He gave me a warm smile full of hope. “You’ll be stronger than me one day. I know it.”

“Yeah, and you’re just going to stop training and wait for me to catch up, are you?”

He cackled. “Not on your life.”

The vast majority of my time from then on was spent standing at the boss room’s entrance until it was time to go to sleep. Then I would wake up and spend even more time there. My level had jumped up dramatically owing to the fact that I’d been on a Substance X hiatus, and Brod’s movements were becoming increasingly clearer to me.

That day, the girls were on cooking duty. Everyone had gotten pretty good at it, including Ketty, much to Kefin’s delight. We’d been in the Labyrinth of Wiles for close to a month, only pausing our training once to pop up and contact people via arclink crystal. Brod had gone out to gather information in Aecius but returned that evening. That had been a few days ago, and I was starting to understand the way he and Lionel fought.

Now, it was the day of their match—no holds barred. They would use some of

the extra weapons I'd stocked up on to keep their main gear from breaking.

"If your weapon breaks, we call it a draw, no matter who has the upper hand," I said. "Also, I'm going to need to see things multiple times if I'm going to learn it, so do your best."

"You're my apprentice. Where's the backup?" Brod demanded.

"It's more proper for a master to support his subordinates," Lionel countered.

"Area Barrier. Okay, show us what you guys are made of! Begin!"

Brod made the first move. Colliding with Lionel's shield at a velocity very much deserving of the title "Whirlwind," my master delivered several attacks in succession, even sneaking in a kick. Brod's firm stance and impressive flexibility were evident in his precise barrage, but there was no understating his footwork. His feet never left the ground except for kicks, and he slid around the battlefield at incredible speed on his heels or toes alone. It was like a dance; it had a tempo, complete with pauses and flourishes. Seamless. I could hardly recognize him.

But Lionel didn't move an inch. His style may have been defense-oriented, but he still managed to cut pauses in Brod's rhythm with his sword. Whenever Brod came with a kick, Lionel was ready with a shield bash, and any time my master's stance faltered, he was there to exploit it with his greatsword. Any ordinary opponent would have lost their nerve.

Suddenly, Lionel's defense cracked, and Brod struck at the opening when his opponent shifted his shield too far to the right—but it was a feint. Flicking his shield up, Lionel deflected my master's sword and went on the offensive. With a single-handed swing, a blade of wind rushed by and sliced Brod's leg, staining it red.

He leaped away on his good leg. "Not bad, Lion."

"I've hardly even begun."

Upon a second glance, Lionel hadn't actually deflected Brod's attack as perfectly as I'd initially thought. His left arm was dyed red and shaking, struggling to hold up the shield. Brod seemed unable to put weight on his foot.

“Luciel. You could definitely learn that sword technique the Lion just used,” Brod called out. “Watch and learn!”

Brod planted his bad leg on the ground and swung his sword through the air. I felt waves of magic accumulate and surge towards Lionel.

“Do not underestimate me, Whirlwind!” he growled, slicing the air like Brod in a similar yet uniquely different way.

Could I really do something like that? I mean, it’d be cool, but now wasn’t the time to ponder it. It was like feathers versus iron. Brod’s wave attacks failed against Lionel’s, but as he parried them away, they disappeared like mirages. And then their swords crumbled to dust.

“It’s a draw,” I declared.

I cast Extra Heal on the two of them, and they both started cackling and roaring with laughter. They locked gazes, stared at each other for a moment, then grinned.



“Close, huh?” Brod bellowed. “You should be one arm short, but the blade didn’t quite finish the job.”

“And you should be on one leg,” Lionel replied.

“Area Barrier helps with that,” I cut in. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why they cared so much about why they hadn’t been able to dismember the other. But they just kept grinning at each other.

“We could probably take on the demons on their home turf with Luciel,” my master said. “Don’t you think?”

“Mister Luciel’s holy magic is the hope of men, so that would be a difficult journey to justify,” Lionel answered.

“Plus...”

“Indeed.”

“He wouldn’t make it out alive,” they said at once.

They didn’t need to worry so much. I had absolutely no intention at all of *ever* going to a place like that in my life, no matter what. Not even the pope could force me. Just try.

“The synchronicity is unneeded,” I said. “I’m not planning on going to the demons’ homeland. And even if I were, it would only be knowing my safety was guaranteed and only to make sure they couldn’t come creeping out.”

That way, at least, it would be for the sake of removing future stress-inducers. But the other two didn’t care, and they ignored me.

“Feels good to go all out for once,” said Brod.

“I agree. I’m very glad I chose to travel with Mister Luciel.”

Could someone please put a leash on these two? I looked at the others, but they were still in awe in the presence of the best fighters humanity had ever known. Evidently, no. No one would put a leash on them. To be fair, though, it had been pretty amazing the way they’d pulled out super moves like they were regular techniques.

Their first match had been short but undoubtedly one of the most advanced

battles one could ever witness. And if I could learn how to mirror what I'd seen, maybe I could improve myself.

With purpose in my heart, days passed as I leveled up against menacing monsters, learned from the battle-crazed lunatics, and sparred. But Brod couldn't leave the Merratoni guild on its own forever, so a little over a week later, we decided it was time to clear the labyrinth.

16 — Progress and the Unexpected

We fought countless monsters tooth and nail, and as a result, my level had increased dramatically. I only wished I could say the same thing about my confidence. Although the things I could do had increased, I couldn't really *feel* the increase in my stats. When I'd had to get by without my eyes or ears, it had felt like I was actively improving, but in the forty-odd days we'd been in the Labyrinth of Wiles, it seemed as if I'd atrophied more than anything else.

I could almost swear that I'd been more lithe *before* leveling up, because now I felt imbalanced, as if my body hadn't caught up to the increase in my attributes. My swordwork had become sloppy and slow. And it had all started when my Detect Magic and Detect Presence skills had hit five.

It was a good thing I was a healer. If I was meant to be on the front lines, I'd have been holding everyone back. When I sparred with Brod, it was like I'd forgotten my technique, and it was crushing to experience. It was like I was an ant at the base of a mountain looking up at the peak. I wanted to follow him, to climb up there with him, but he was so far gone that I didn't even know how to begin.

Everyone tried to cheer me up by telling me I *had* gotten stronger, but as far as I could tell, my heightened stats only made my attacks a little bit quicker. The sense of firm progress I'd felt while leveling up my Holy Magic skill was nowhere to be seen with my martial skills.

Such was my fate for choosing to be a healer, I supposed. Still, I continued to struggle on. The frustration fueled me. I had to believe that I'd have a breakthrough at *some* point. Plus, I wasn't alone. It helped me to think of it as simply improving my odds of buying enough time in a fight to flee to safety. Brod wasn't one of my subordinates, but regardless, I didn't have to be so afraid of everything as long as I had him and everyone else.

I couldn't call this life fulfilled until I found peace. Until I found somewhere I could live quietly, where I could build a family. And I wanted to create a village

or town of some kind where my friends could do the same. Until then, I couldn't say either of my lives had been full. That was why I kept on trying.

Getting out of here also meant I might be able to get to go to Neldahl, where I could learn offensive magic. And I could stay far away from Illumasia and Blanche, and Luburk until the war with the empire settled down, at least. I wanted to see Dhoran and the girls again too. They would be happy to get all these magic stones.

But I had to get out of here first.

"All right," I muttered resolutely.

With my tentative schedule decided in my head, I prepared breakfast for the morning. Everyone slowly got up, and once they were awake, we ate together.

"Well, we're clearing the labyrinth today," Brod announced once we'd eaten. "You've all improved a lot. Be proud. Unless the Lion's pulling his punches, he says you could all take the Church's paladins, no sweat."

"Master, you're not supposed to say that out loud," I reprimanded him.

"Oh. Anyway," he continued, "that doesn't mean you can get cocky. Despite everything I just said, anything can happen in a fight. A single status affliction could make you lose your nerve entirely."

Everyone gave a spirited and powerful, "Yes, sir." Even Lionel nodded firmly. It was a confidence-inspiring start to the day.

But when we hit floor forty-one, things started changing. Monsters started to roam the halls. Which, while not particularly surprising for a labyrinth in and of itself, why had we not seen a single one until just now?

As we proceeded regardless, careful of traps, something else caught my attention.

"The Thunder Dragon was here, so I expected electric-types or maybe the opposing element," I murmured. "But these monsters seem randomized like the others."

And they certainly weren't weak. The ogres and minotaurs were nothing to sneeze at, but after chimeras, cyclops, and more, it was hard to be intimidated

by them. Annoyingly, though, they tended to run straight at us, and sometimes that meant they'd get themselves killed in a trap, but other times it meant the trap would spawn even more enemies for us to deal with.

Other encounters included weird, fire-breathing alligator things, acid-spitting ants, and various colorful species with unique ways of ending our lives. Brod and Lionel didn't even need to get close, since they could slice them up from a distance.

"What I'm wondering is why they don't drop stones," my master murmured back. "Someone might be summoning these monsters."

"Summoned? As in, they're not spawning here naturally?" I asked. "But why?"

"Summoning needs magic stones, blood, and mana. You can do it with just stones, but you won't be able to control it, so it's only really good for fodder."

I had a bad feeling about this. "Do you think it's the slaver? He knew summoning magic."

"Dunno," he replied flatly. "Why would someone bother summoning monsters in a *labyrinth*, though?"

"Could they be trying to level themselves up? Or some other monster they're controlling?"

"You'd have to be one sick son of a bitch to make your own monsters fight each other," Brod growled. "It's like some sick puppet show."

Still, if someone was summoning these monsters, they were leveling up their skills. Then I remembered that we'd spent over a month in the fortieth floor boss room, and the slaver had never come through. If we'd somehow missed each other during our one trip out, there should have been monsters beyond the final ten floors. Perhaps it could have been done with spacetime magic, given he had been reincarnated, but he already had an appraisal skill. So he would have needed to be an exceptionally high level to have acquired both.

If he'd somehow managed that, we were pretty much walking straight to our doom.

"Should we go back?" I offered.

“Nah. I’m going to Merratoni once this is over, and you don’t wanna go to Neldahl with unfinished business either, do you?”

“True. I’ll follow your lead.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got your back.”

Something uncomfortable stirred in my chest when Brod said that. But I pushed the feeling down, told myself nothing bad could happen with a group like this, and pressed on.

The traps took on a whole new level of difficulty from then on, and even Brod started to have trouble disarming them. Often, though, monsters would trigger them while coming for me. Monsieur Luck had been on my side quite a bit since coming here. My master seemed to have taken notice of my fortune as well, and he told me I could open any treasure chests we found.

Unfortunately, we neared the end of the fiftieth floor empty-handed. The door to the boss room was shut tight and all was silent inside.

“I’m going to open this one,” I said.

No way I was going to let Brod or Lionel decide what the last boss was going to be. I didn’t feel like fighting a full-on rainbow of dragons just because some people had distorted ideas of fun.

Reluctantly, everyone acquiesced.

I cast Area Barrier on our group and opened the door. Inside was a single humanoid silhouette. A familiar one, but one evoking far more fear than it had before. It was the slaver.

“Oh, so you’re the odd bunch conquering this labyrinth,” he said, none of the rage from last time evident in his tone.

“You,” I murmured. “You came all the way here alone?”

“I have a name, you know. Call me Vlad. For it is by my blood that my monstrous armies are born.”

I didn’t know what kind of power high this guy was on, but it didn’t seem like he’d touched the core. Then again, he’d named himself “Vlad,” and he

summoned minions with...his blood. Even aside from that little on-the-nose detail, there was definitely something off about him. Something wrong.

“Where’s the return circle?” I asked. “There should be a magic circle after the lord of the chamber’s been defeated.”

“Indeed there should. I suppose that means the boss still has some use,” he replied haughtily. “Now, since you’ve saved me the trouble of finding you, I think I’ll take this opportunity to grind those dreams of yours to dust. And then I’ll take those sisters, and soon, Blanche will be no more.”

Runic circles suddenly appeared all around the room. What had he meant by “some use”? That didn’t make any sense.

A barrage of slashes suddenly went flying through the air towards Vlad. But moments before reaching their target, they eviscerated a giant ogre that had suddenly manifested from a circle directly in front of him. Vlad was untouched, save for his shock.

“Apparently, you’ve a few monsters yourself,” he growled. “You weren’t this strong the last time we fought!”

No one offered a reply. Brod, Ketty, and Kefin went for the monsters being summoned with Estia and Nadia, and Lionel launched his fireballs while protecting me and Lydia as she cast spells from afar. I continually cast Heal and prepared to throw out Aura Coat or Recover in case an enemy began spewing poison or miasma.

“This is ridiculous!” Vlad blustered. He flinched back, stunned that we could take down his prized army so easily. “How are your levels so much higher?! It’s not fair! IT’S NOT FAIR, DAMMIT!”

His composure utterly shattered, Vlad threw an armful of magic stones onto the ground, sliced his palm, and doused them with his blood. A large circle began to form, but before I could nullify it with Sanctuary Circle, Lionel stopped me.

“Sir, the return circle hasn’t appeared yet,” he said. “What he’s about to summon is surely this chamber’s master. Let’s allow him to finish, and we’ll cut them both down.”

I turned to Brod, and he nodded. To be honest, I didn't want to take the life of one of the reincarnated, but that was my ego talking. We couldn't leave until the return circle appeared, and I couldn't sacrifice my companions for the sake of my own selfish morality.

"Okay," I said finally. "We're all making it out."

"Yes, sir."

We managed to clear the rest of the monsters in the room before Vlad could finish his summoning. When he did, a single chimera emerged from the great circle of magic.

Vlad, pale from magical exhaustion, looked at our blank expressions and sneered. "Well?!" he shouted between pants. "This chimera is my ultimate ace in the hole! No one sees this and lives!"

Once Vlad was satisfied with his monologue, the beast leaped at Estia and Nadia, but Lydia intersected it with magical spears of water. Estia used the opening to strike the chimera's lion head with a blast of darkness. Roaring in pain, the monster lashed out at the nearest threat. Nadia parried its attack with her shield and countered with a slash at its feet. Undaunted, the goat portion of the beast shot an arc of lightning at her, but Nadia's dragon shield nullified the attack, allowing her to deliver a deeper cut to the chimera's foreleg.

But in doing so, she left herself open. The snake at the chimera's rear whipped around before the older sister could re-assume her stance. A feline blur leaped in. Ketty, faster than even Brod when it came to pure speed, bashed the viper's head with the flat of her blade. Then Kefin fell from above, cleaving the monster's neck in two. Meanwhile, the lion head, still blinded by a cloud of darkness, opened its mouth to breathe fire, but Estia was quicker, and she plunged her blade into the creature's maw.

The goat head, sensing the loss of the lion and the pain its third part was in, began to unleash its lightning at Nadia frantically, likely in frustration as it knew the effort was futile. Ketty and Kefin capitalized on the opening in its guard to mutilate one of its hind legs, and when it stumbled, they drove their swords into the creature's torso. The goat head wailed as it came crumbling down before Nadia decapitated it for good measure.

The chimera was dead.

“Impossible,” Vlad muttered, his lips trembling. “You can’t win that easily...not against an A-class monster.”

He looked up from his fallen creation at the five who had defeated it, and all at once, they replied in unison, “That’s what happens when you have a good teacher, a good healer, and a bunch of strong monsters to fight!”

The chimera vanished, leaving behind a single magic stone. Return circles appeared beneath the feet of everyone who had contributed to the battle, and four of them disappeared on the spot, leaving the rest of us to wonder what had just happened.

Estia, however, remained, likely due to the Spirit of Dusk’s power, if I had to guess based on the surge of black light that had gone off when her circle had tried to whisk her away. She had come to control her abilities fairly well recently, but right now, the spirit was probably in control.

Most unexpected of all was the core appearing right before Vlad, of all people. I’d seen a group of adventurers turn into undead husks just by touching it, and it was capable of summoning the Wicked One. So Vlad was not the best person for the core to be within reach of.

Had Monsieur Luck been looking out for me and tried to distance me from something potentially harmful? Or had he decided now was the best time to clock out?

Regardless, the moment I realized what was happening, I screamed, “We need to leave! *Now!*”

Brod, Lionel, and I rushed to the circle beneath Estia, which hadn’t vanished yet. My master launched an air slash at Vlad to try to kill him before he could touch the core, but something blocked it.

We were steps away from the return circle when it disappeared.

17 — Defying Injustice

Vlad had taken the core in his hands, dispelling the return circle. He touched his body all over in disbelief. The core had blocked the attack that should have killed him, and he was still alive.

We were trapped. The only other way out of the boss room was the door we'd come in through, but that was gone now too. The Thunder Dragon's door wasn't anywhere to be seen either.

Vlad's expression changed from one of shock to joy. Yet, he just stood there, silent and unmoving, as if he'd awakened to something.

"Master, over here," I said quickly, ignoring the slaver. I chugged the best potion I had for restoring magic and waited for Brod to be within range. *"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy and swaddle me in wings of angelic light. Be my shield against impurity. Sanctuary Barrier!"*

A dome of light burst into existence with me at the center. I'd all but given up on the physical side of fighting in the last month—holy magic was still my best hope against the Wicked One's machinations. Although I wouldn't have needed to use my secret weapon if we could have just cleared the place, there was no point dwelling on it. All that mattered was getting out alive.

"Luciel, what is this?" Brod asked. "And what're those mirrors circling us?"

"It's a spell I came up with based on Sanctuary Circle," I explained. "I call it Sanctuary Barrier. Consider those shields around it an indicator of how strong it is and how long it can stay standing." There was no time to cover the spell's exact capabilities, so I'd have to save it for later.

"How can he hold that core and be all right?" Lionel wondered aloud, sweat forming on his brow. "The miasma is incredible."

"No way that's the same guy," Brod replied with similar concern in his voice. "His mind's been taken."

“Estia, why didn’t you escape?” I asked.

“I felt that I shouldn’t,” two voices said at once. “Or I would never see my dear sister again.”

“We’ll need your help if we’re going to make it out of this.”

“I fear that may be unlikely.”

“As long as it’s not impossible,” I said. “Keep Estia near the back on support.”

So long as she was safe, she could rely on the Spirit of Dusk’s power, and it would increase her chances of surviving. And if we did make it out, she could handle any monsters herself.

I turned to Vlad, and he cackled. “Oh, yes. I can feel the power,” he moaned. He began to walk towards us. “You... You enjoyed making a fool of me earlier, didn’t you?”

There was a second voice overlapping his own, and it echoed, as if the words themselves were filled with magical energy. I could physically feel their weight.

“Why do you think we were enjoying it?” I asked. Brod and Lionel eyed Vlad carefully for an opening.

“Because I know your eyes. I saw them in Blanche. In the filthy nobles.” His eyes were glazed over, staring off into nothing. The corruption was spreading. “I was reincarnated. The appraisal skill I began with gave me an edge as a merchant, and I leveled up using easy targets around town. Slimes. Goblins. Horned rabbits. Skills came easy to me. It was fun.”

“I know it was!” I shouted. “I know that feeling of freedom. So why do you try to hurt people now?”

He stepped into the barrier, his skin searing in the light. But he could feel no pain anymore. He kept walking closer.

“Because the pigheaded son of an aristocrat stole the one I love. He stole her. He had his way with her. And then he killed her. Do you want to know why?” He waited for a moment. “Because the people were having fun. Because they were happy. That’s it.”

“Then I don’t blame you,” I said. “Something like that probably would have

twisted me. I would want blood. But how is what you're doing any different from what the noble did?"

Vlad had attempted to murder the sisters, and when that had failed, he'd enslaved them. Those were serious crimes.

"I learned something that day," he continued. My words couldn't reach him anymore. "In this world, it's kill or be killed."

"Luciel, it's no use. He's lost it," Brod said.

"He's hallucinating," added Lionel.

Vlad's body combusted into pale white flames, but he didn't stop. He continued to approach me, his body melting away, until we were a few paces apart. He held the core in his hands up high.

"You can't stop me. I'll never stop. Not until I avenge Mina, and I'll crush anything or anyone who gets in my way," he muttered. *"Take my flesh, take my blood, and take my soul. Reduce this land to smoldering earth."*

Suddenly, Vlad became the epicenter of a great explosion. A thick smokescreen hid his form, but I could feel something inside it. It was incredible. And it was growing.

"What is this pressure?" Brod growled. His brow was sweating.

"Sir, can you cast Sanctuary Circle while this barrier is active?" Lionel asked swiftly.

I hadn't tested it before, but now was as good a time as any. It beat dying, anyway.

"It's worth a shot," I replied. *"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy and shield me in ramparts of angelic light. Engulf impurity in a bastion of radiance. Sanctuary Circle!"*

A pillar of light engulfed the smoke, swallowing it up entirely. But then, it cracked. And the fissure widened until the pillar shattered.

In the remnants of my broken spell was him. The one I'd been dodging for years. Someone I'd never wanted to meet. The Wicked One—taking the form of a demonic human.



"That's a very rude way to greet someone," a voice echoed inside my head despite my level ten resistance to such interference.

Goosebumps rippled across my skin. I had no idea how I was even still standing. Estia was already on the floor, trembling. I couldn't even find the words to make fun of his stupid clothes.

"Would you leave if I said I was sorry?" I asked. "I'm sure you can't stick around very long, you know, with Crya the Divine and all."

"Now, now, don't be short with me. You've done well for a group of mortals, coming this far. And without being corrupted by the core's presence as well. Tell me, you wouldn't happen to be labyrinth crawlers, would you?"

How had he figured us out? Well, telling the truth probably wouldn't make him happy, so it was time to try my other secret weapon: lying.

"Nope," I said flatly. Enduring his presence took much of my concentration. "We were following that guy who blew himself up just now."

The Wicked One cackled. *"Boy, I may be wicked, but I am still a god. Lying is a sin. And gods punish sinners."*

Then don't ask, I groaned in my heart.

Instead of talking back again, I focused on holding the barrier up. But the Wicked One raised a single hand and swung it from left to right. That was all it took. All the shields around the barrier cracked at once, and a fissure split open on the dome. I quickly spat the chant out several times in quick succession, overlapping the spell with three more to keep it from collapsing.

"Impressive."

"Thanks. Now please go home."

No, seriously. Crya, Divine Healer, ancestors, the bad guy's right here. Come get him. Better yet, come get me.

I had to keep him talking until the clock ran out. What clock? I had no idea. I could only hope there was one, because otherwise we were screwed.

He chuckled. *"You're an entertaining one."*

“You know, I’m not feeling very entertaining, personally,” I said. “Why are you even interfering with the battle between the hero and the Demon Lord in the first place? I’ve got my hands full with the friggin’ dragons and spirits! I’m just some guy! Can I please catch a break?!”

“That rabble doesn’t interest me. Why, though, does a world of demons terrify you so?”

He spoke flippantly, like it was a passing curiosity of his. And that, ladies and gentlemen, was why I couldn’t stand these glorified supernatural pests.

Still, I think I understood him. It was simple, really. When you were at the top of the pyramid, satisfying your curiosity was all you had left. Even if he wanted to restrain it, it would be too strong to ignore. He was doing what he was doing because he could. There was nothing else to it. And there was no arguing with someone like that. If a world of demons was his idea of fun, I wouldn’t be able to change his mind.

“I don’t know much about the demon people, but if they’re fundamentally stronger than humans or beastpeople, I’m not going to get any peace and quiet. Please go home.”

“You speak your mind well. I like you. Join me and observe the world as my undead pawn.”

Oh, for the love of... That was his cue to give us a demonstration of his power, wasn’t it?

“Not happening!” Brod cried, sending a full power air slash at the Wicked One.

“Perish!” shouted Lionel as he did the same.

But their attacks were blocked by an invisible wall just centimeters from their target. Unfazed, they struck again, and they continued to strike as I fortified the barrier with more of my magic.

“You know it is futile, yet you continue to struggle,” his voice echoed. *“I do like you creatures.”*

“Then do us a favor and take a hit or get lost!” Brod snarled.

“We will slay even a god to protect our apprentice!” Lionel roared.

“*Slay?*” The deity howled with laughter. “*Very well. Since you’re so impatient, I’ll corrupt the two of you first.*”

They were playthings to him. *Toys.*

“Guys!” I shouted. “He may look mortal, but that’s a *god* we’re up against!”

The pair simply laughed. They knew. In fact, that was why they’d attacked in the first place. Because if they didn’t, we’d all die here anyway.

“Luciel,” my master said, “it might be my last chance to say this, so listen. No matter how hard things get, the fight’s not over till you say it is. There’s light at the end of every rotten tunnel. That’s not my lesson to you. It’s what *you* taught *me.*”

“But... No,” I argued. “Don’t say that. Crya might come to save us if we buy enough time. Maybe there’s a limit to how long he can keep that form.”

“You don’t think a god’s thought of that?” he shot back. “Let your teacher handle this.”

I gazed up at him helplessly for what felt like the last time I’d ever get to.

Lionel smiled at me next. “Meeting you has shown me that hope yet remains in the world. Not just for me, or us, but everyone,” he said. “If giving up my old bones to the earth is what I must do to save you, then so be it.”

“Lionel, you have unfinished business. That’s the whole reason you’re still a slave,” I said, all but begging. “And what about Nalia?”

“Nalia will understand,” he replied calmly. “And slavery was a burden I chose out of spite. But you showed me the cage I had locked my heart in, and you freed it. I can think of no greater honor than fighting for a master such as you.”

They were ready to die. They were preparing to extinguish their own lives, all to save mine. What was I to do? Was there no future where the three of us could survive together?

“*Have you said your goodbyes?*” the god asked amusedly. “*Then come meet your end.*”

It pissed me off how he acted like this was a joke to him. Everyone was going to die because of me.

It was time to stop cowering.

“I really would go home if I were you,” I said, my voice trembling with anger. “Because you’re not corrupting anyone while I’m here!” I pulled out the next ace up my sleeve. *“Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy and forge with it mail of light. Don for me a holy aegis. Sanctuary Armor!”*

I’d only come up with this spell last night. It was still unstable, so I didn’t want to use it.

“I’m not letting you two die,” I declared. “Go beat the crap out of him.”

They nodded firmly. “Brod the Whirlwind, headin’ out.”

“Lionel, the Lion of War, deploying.”

They didn’t hold back. Right out of the gate, as soon as they stepped through the barrier, they launched a flurry of attacks at the Wicked One, but each fell short and hit only the invisible wall. Still, they continued the onslaught, undaunted and with extraordinary coordination. And the stalemate was mutual. They deflected and countered all of the god’s attacks, while the Sanctuary Armor seemed to be doing its job at protecting them from being corrupted.

“I’ve not done battle against humans for some time, and I must say, I’m unimpressed,” our enemy said. A grin spread over his face. *“You won’t mind if I pick up the pace, will you? Just try not to get hit or you might turn undead.”*

He’d been holding back, but thanks to that, I managed to have a bit of a breakthrough. The invisible wall was made of miasma. It was translucent most of the time except when an attack landed and a small hint of purple smoke came off it. There was no way to know if this was part of the game or a trap, but we were short on ideas. So I took my chances.

I wouldn’t have figured it out without Brod’s and Lionel’s relentless attacks. So it was my turn to help. I waited for the perfect lapse in combat, and then free cast Sanctuary Circle. Our reward for the tactic...was a couple of light scratches on both of his arms.

“Amusing. Your fragile bodies withstand my blows,” the Wicked One mused. *“Very well. In deference to your skills, I will keep my promise and leave. Farewell, labyrinth crawlers.”*

I didn't like what he meant by “promise.” I glanced at my companions, but they seemed fine.

“And don't come back,” I spat. “Now, how are we supposed to get out of here?”

The Wicked One tossed the core aside. *“Once the undead are purged, you will see.”*

And then he vanished.

“What's that supposed to mean? Estia, are you okay?” I asked.

“I'm fine...I think,” she replied. Estia had assumed control of her own body again. The spirit had been protecting her mind.

“Master, Lionel, you two were...” —my voice trailed away—“amazing...”

When I turned to them, they were smiling. Their bodies crumbled away, and their Sanctuary Armor with it. They were the undead the Wicked One had been talking about.

“We couldn't have done this...without you...” Brod rumbled, his voice hoarse. “Not sure how I feel about that...as your master, but...I'm glad you're okay...”

“My duty...” Lionel wheezed, “is fulfilled...”

Their expressions were calm, and they greeted death quietly.

“Hold on! I'll heal you!” I cried hysterically. Tears fell from my eyes as I racked my brain for something, anything, that could save them.

“Sorry, kid...we're already half gone...” my master grunted. “Do it. Take the experience points. Get the final blow before it's too late...”

“Before the darkness takes us...” Lionel groaned. “Hurry...”

Miasma began to waft from their bodies. The corruption was about to set in. Was this really happening? People died all the time, but this? It wasn't fair. I was furious. At the Wicked One for causing it and at the deity in charge who

had let this injustice pass.

I hadn't saved anyone corrupted by the Wicked One in the past. I'd put their souls to rest, but their lives had been lost as far as I was concerned. So what, now that it's happened to someone close to me, I was going to actually try? Voices and thoughts fought and surged through my head. Ultimately, though, the answer I reached was a simple one.

The reason I, an average and unassuming person, had been reincarnated in this world was to save these two. These two heroes. This was what my life had been leading to. I didn't know if the spell would kill me, but I was prepared for it. Just like they had been.

I stood up and downed a heap of potions from my magic bag. "Don't you guys know that the undead give crap experience?" I said. "Plus, how am I supposed to find some peace and quiet if my teacher *and* the head of my team kick the bucket at the same time? Seriously, guys, it's like you don't even think."

I opened my status screen and navigated to the skill section. "You were right," I told my master. "You told me once that I'd find the right time to use up all these points. And you were right."

I spent my accumulated SP on two skills: Limit Break for two hundred and Supreme Luck for one hundred.

Limit Break would allow me to surpass my own physical limitations at the cost of a recoil twice the amount of power I used, and the effects got exponentially worse if I went beyond my available mana. I also called upon the help of the next step above Monsieur Luck—Supreme Luck—because after the events that had just transpired, I wasn't confident he could be relied upon right now. What I was about to do was extremely stupid, so I was going to need all the luck I could get.

"Estia, take these." I handed her two hermit keys and a small bag of platinum and gold. "If I pass out, put us in the coffin and get out of here. Use that money if you need it." I smiled at her and turned to the other two without waiting for her reply. "I need you two to die first. It's not going to feel good, but your work's not done. You still have more to teach me."

I rubbed my hands together, took a deep breath, and began to chant. "*Oh*

holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy and shield me in ramparts of angelic light. Engulf impurity in a bastion of radiance. Sanctuary Circle!" With that, I removed the corrupted parts of their bodies. But before they could disappear completely, I chanted again. *"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy for an angelic breath and restore this form. Come to me, machinations of life. Extra Heal!"*

And then, it was time to call their spirits back with a spell I had hoped I would never have to use but memorized anyway. Just in case. I didn't care if it was forbidden. If it was wrong to fight back against the Wicked One for unfairly twisting my destiny, then I didn't want to be right.

"Oh great healer. Oh molder of fate. Guide these lives that have strayed from the paths ordained since time eternal and return their souls whither they belong. By my power and thy mercy, I beseech the divines, weave the threads of these souls so that they may rejoin the fabric of the future. Revive!"

The light that enveloped Lionel and Brod wasn't pale white like usual. It was golden. As their bodies returned to the ones I knew, I began to sigh in relief. But then my heart throbbed as if it had exploded in my chest. I vomited blood, and a stream of hot liquid oozed out of my nose.



My vision flickered, but the pair hadn't been completely restored yet. I grit my teeth, continued to imbue the spell with more magic, and even as I felt the same warm liquid start to trickle from my ears, I refused to crumble. I tried casting Extra Heal on myself, but it had little effect.

Gradually, my friends returned. Only when I was sure they had been fully restored and the golden light had twinkled its last did I let my consciousness fade.

It was a good life.

18 — A Price to Pay

I was adrift in darkness. Limp. Only the beat of my heart in my ears told me I was still alive. Although my body was immobile, my thoughts were not, though I couldn't use magic for some reason despite my mana having fully recovered. Perhaps it was the recoil from surpassing my limits and using forbidden magic not once but multiple times on top of casting other spells simultaneously. Revive was mortally dangerous. There couldn't have been much for the Limit Break skill to do when I was already pushing myself to the point of death. It was kind of up to the gods now.

I searched for magic or presences other than my own, but I was alone. I was starting to wonder if I was really alive or if that was an illusion in itself when a light broke through the darkness and swaddled my unmoving body. Several voices echoed inside my head in quick succession.

“Traveler from beyond space and time, bold are you for subjecting your mortal body to the forbidden arts.”

“Such transgressions do not go unpunished.”

“However, we acknowledge that the tragedy which befell you did so by the Wicked One's designs.”

“Thus we absolve you of thy sins.”

“Though not without a cost to your body.”

“Chosen of the Divine Healer—my chosen. It is my greatest hope that you will find your way to the path of healing once more.”

“Awaken.”

The voices reverberated down into my very soul, so deeply that I forgot how to speak. My confusion went unheeded, however, and with that final word, warmth returned to my body, like blood flowing freely back into bound limbs. Something embraced me, carrying me upward, and the light began to fade.

Moments later, I felt my awareness return to the real world. I slowly opened my eyes and saw...more darkness.

“COME ON!” I hollered. My hand hit something hard, there was a clatter, and I made out the faint sliver of what looked to be a white ceiling. “Oh. I’m in the hermit coffin.”

I sighed in relief. I was back in the real world, and I could move my body. Pushing against the slightly ajar lid of the coffin, I entered a room of pure white. Outside, there were a few other coffins and a door.

“Yeah, I was definitely in the hermit coffin,” I muttered. “Thank goodness Estia was around.”

Before exiting, I opened my status page. Something the Divine Healer had said was worrying me a little.

Name: Luciel

Job: (Healer X) — Quad Dragoon IV

Age: 22

Level: 193

HP: 7290 — MP: 5270

STR: 850 — VIT: 932

DEX: 801 — AGI: 825

INT: 961 — MGI: 959

RMG: 954 — SP: 86

SKILLS

Assess Mastery I — Monster Luck I — Supreme Luck I

Limit Break I — Martial Arts VI — Swordsmanship V

Spears IV — Shields IV — Archery I

Sword-and-Spear IV — Throwing VI — Ambulation VIII

Magic Handling X — Magic Control X — Magic Amplification III Physical Enhancement VI — Short Cast IX — Null Cast VII

Free Casting IV — Magic Circle Casting VI — Multicast III (Holy Magic X)

Meditation IX — Focus IX — Leadership III

Detect Danger VIII — Detect Presence V — Detect Magic V

Scouting I — Butchery IV — Riding III

Life Recovery IX — Magic Recovery IX — Parallel Thinking VII Accelerated Thought III — Spatial Cognition II — Trap Sensing IV

Trap Detection III — Disarming III — Cartography V

HP Growth Rate Up IX — MP Growth Rate Up IX

STR Growth Rate Up IX — VIT Growth Rate Up IX

DEX Growth Rate Up IX — AGI Growth Rate Up IX

INT Growth Rate Up IX — MGI Growth Rate Up IX

RMG Growth Rate Up IX — Physical Attribute Growth Rate Up VI

Poison Resist IX — Paralysis Resist IX — Petrify Resist IX

Sleep Resist IX — Charm Resist VII — Curse Resist IX

Enfeeble Resist IX — Silence Resist IX — Disease Resist IX

Shock Resist VII — Bewitchment Resist IX — Spiritual Resist X

Slash Resist IX — Stab Resist VII — Intimidation Resist V

TITLES

Shaper of Destiny — Protection of the God of Fate — Blessing of the Divine Healer Blessings of the Dragons — Blessings of the Spirits — Dragonslayer Slayer of Drakes — Giant Buster — Butcherer of Beasts

Witness of the Wicked One — He Who Released the Seal — Chosen of the

Everything appeared in bright white letters as usual, but there were two that were grayed out, as if they'd lost their power.

"I don't know if I was a 'witness to the Wicked One' so much as Brod and Lionel were, but what's with my healer class and Holy Magic skill being all gray?" I wondered aloud. "*Heal.*"

I cast the spell like I always did, but nothing happened. I didn't even feel any magic flow through me. I checked with Assess Mastery, but experience points wouldn't show up for max-level skills, so I learned nothing.

"I swear, if I went through this and they're still dead..."

The loss of my holy magic was a shock—as surprising as it may sound, my nerves were not, in fact, made of steel—but I had one hope. The Divine Healer had implied that I could get it back. That I could "find my way back to the path of healing."

"Well," I said, "no point sitting around."

I opened the door, praying that everyone would be waiting for me on the other side.

Greeting me when I exited were Brod, Lionel, and the others.

"Finally up."

"I'm glad to see you've awakened, sir."

I thanked the heavens. They were alive albeit...a little different.

"You're both okay," I said, sighing in relief. "I'm so glad."

Brod pinched his brow and looked to the side. "The shit you pulled, Luciel..."

"You were unconscious for ten days," said Lionel. "We were worried."

No wonder I didn't feel woozy from magical exhaustion.

"Hey, uh..." I stammered. "Is it just me or do you two look, like, a *lot* younger?"

“It does appear that way,” Lionel replied. “When we awoke, we found ourselves in bodies that seem to be about twenty years of age.”

The Revive spell could do that? Or was it something else? Whatever the case, it wasn't very fair that *their* return to youth didn't seem to have dampened the profound, aged air about them. And I'd probably never solve that mystery, because like hell was I ever doing it again.

“A side effect, maybe. Or a bonus, depending on how you look at it,” I murmured. “Did you both wake up right away?”

Someone who'd been fidgeting on the side stepped forward first. “No,” Ketty answered. “Only three days ago.”

“Our slave pacts were lifted all at once,” Kefin added, penetrating my personal space. “Ketty and I were afraid you'd died, sir!”

“First, back up!” I exclaimed. “Second, if that's true, then maybe I really did sort of die for a time. By the way, where are we?”

“The expensive inn we were staying at in Aecius,” Estia replied. “I've heard the staff here is exceptionally tight-lipped as long as you have enough coin.”

“I see,” I said. “You really saved us, Estia.” I lowered my head to her.

“Stop. I could hardly keep from shaking back there.”

“That doesn't change what you did.”

She shuddered and looked away. Had she not been there to get us out, we may not have survived. Not Brod, not Lionel, and certainly not me. She'd had the courage to simply be there and stow us in the hermit coffins when the time was right. I was more than grateful.

“We're only alive right now because you put us in the coffins and escaped. We all owe our lives to you.” I bowed again. This time even lower. “Thank you.”

Brod and Lionel followed suit. Estia started to freak out before breaking into flustered tears. Ketty consoled her by rubbing her back.

“Luciel,” my master said, returning us to the main topic, “there has to be some kinda whiplash after using magic like that.”

“Both our physical and job levels were reduced to one,” Lionel remarked, “and all of our long-practiced skills have been completely wiped.”

Revive magic was pretty harsh in this world, it seemed. Of course, with their memories and experience still intact, they’d only become even stronger this time. And they surely intended to do just that based on how well they appeared to be taking things.

“Sounds like it was costly,” I said.

“Don’t sweat it,” Brod replied. “We’ve still got everything we learned, so it’s not so bad gettin’ to be young again.”

There was an uncharacteristic cheer in his voice as he tried to defuse the tension in the air. But it was true that they had lost a lot. Even so, they looked genuinely glad to be alive, and I didn’t want to dismiss that.

Still, I had to tell him. I looked my master in the eye and said, “I lost my holy magic and healer class.”

Brod recoiled in shock. “I... I’m sorry, Luciel.”

“Sir!” Lionel exclaimed.

Everyone wore expressions of disbelief. I’d anticipated such a reaction, but it still made me feel a little lump in my throat.

I smiled at them in spite of that. “It’ll all work out. I can still *sense* holy magic, so I’m just having some trouble casting spells, that’s all.”

“But your position,” Brod said. “What’ll happen to everything you’ve worked for?”

I was sure I’d figure it out, but on the off chance I didn’t, I could just be a merchant in Yenice.

“I don’t *need* to be an S-rank healer,” I replied. “I’ve still got the school in Yenice and my company to run. Heck, I might even get to live a peaceful life.”

My master fell to his knees, and a tear rolled down his cheek. “I’m sorry.”

Blood dripped from Lionel’s furiously clenched fists.

“It’s not all hopeless,” I insisted. “I think I should be able to get it back with

some effort.”

“You might regain your spellcasting?” Lionel asked frantically. I knew he and Brod would beat themselves up for this.

“This is something I already thought might happen, so I do have some ideas.”

“I’ll do anything I can to help,” Brod said enthusiastically. I was pretty sure he had to get back to Merratoni and do his guildmaster duties, but I figured I shouldn’t embarrass him in public.

“The Spirit of Tides in Yenice told me that we’d meet again when I was at my lowest. So I’ve kind of been ready for something to happen ever since.”

“You’ve got a plan?” Brod’s expression was desperate. It really felt like he was more worried about this whole thing than I was.

“Three potential plans, actually,” I said. “My first is having the pope change my class entirely. If that happens, I’d hope to swap to paladin or sage.”

“You could do that right here at HQ,” my master added excitedly.

That was the easiest option, true, but would it be enough to “weather the storm” like the spirit had told me? I wasn’t so sure.

“That’s only option one. Plus, I’d rather let Her Holiness handle it than a stranger.”

“But you could...” He trailed off. “No. Information’ll leak if I get involved.”

Brod definitely seemed to trust whoever was at the top of Adventurer’s Guild HQ, but no organization was a monolith. There were bound to be people with different aims and objectives.

“We can count on the pope. Even if she can’t change my class, I can go to Neldahl, get the Spirit of Gales’s blessing, and once I have all six, my job should change on its own.”

I already had access to the water, earth, fire, darkness, and light spirits’ blessings. And if that didn’t work, I could always become an arcanist.

“Your bets do often pay off,” said Kefin. He grinned, remembering my luck with the random bosses as well as my various other fortunate escapades. “It

could work.”

“Our second option,” I continued, “is going to see the Spirit of Tides. They predicted this, so I might learn something about how to get my magic back if we pay them another visit.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Ketty shot Lionel a knowing glance. “Maybe we’ll meet Nalia.”

Lionel didn’t even blink. The man was as stoic as stone.

“Our last option,” I went on, “is finding someone who can use spacetime magic and reset my skills. We’d have to train me up so I could buy new skills with SP, and in that case I’d need your help, Master.”

“Bettin’ on fairy tales now?” Brod made a nasty grimace. “*Reset your skills?*”

Lionel made a similarly ogre-like expression.

“What? I’d just be in the same boat as you two.” I laughed. “For the record, I am pretty shaken up over losing my holy magic. It makes me shiver to think about seeing monsters when I can’t heal anyone. But I’d do it all again if I had to. I want you to cherish your lives, regardless of whether you think you owe them to me or not, and I want us all to live to see our hair turn gray.”

I smiled.

“Right,” Brod murmured.

Lionel hung his head. “Perhaps this time...”

All baggage does is hold you back. If you want to move on, you just have to do it. So that’s what I was going to do. I couldn’t simply wish the things I’d lost back into existence, and I still had the other skills I’d trained up, my top-notch equipment, and plenty of money. Above all, I had friends to rely on. I chose to see the situation not as starting from rock bottom, but as an opportunity with infinite potential.

Had the Spirit of Tides not warned me, I probably would have been so blind with confusion and frustration that I would have taken it out on Brod and Lionel. But, however faint, there was hope in this situation, which I had honestly expected would be far worse. And that was worthy of celebrating with my old

friend Monsieur Luck and our newest member, Sir Preme Luck. All I had to do was put in the effort.

We decided we would quickly depart Grandol for our first destination on the journey to get my magic back: Merratoni. Brod didn't seem too happy about it, but after being gone for ten days longer than planned, he couldn't really postpone it any longer.

Apparently, my master hadn't popped into HQ at all after de-aging. Nadia and Lydia also didn't want it getting out that they'd recovered from impossible injuries, so they hadn't gone outside either, placing most of the burden on Ketty, Kefin, and Estia.

Noting that I needed to repay them once things were back to normal, we dispersed for the day. Once everyone left my room, I got the hermit key back from Estia and opened the stable. My magic bag actually worked fine, but I did almost freak out when I considered the possibility that it wouldn't.

I called for Forêt, and she came running at once. The first thing she did was nibble on my head.

"Haven't had that in a while," I murmured to her. "Well, girl...I can't use holy magic anymore. I guess that means I'm not a healer. To be honest, I'm afraid of how everyone's going to take it. I don't know how I'm going to live in this world without my healing magic."

Forêt turned away, seemingly bored of biting my noggin, and just when I thought she was about to go inside, her hind leg pegged me hard in the chest.

"Whoa!" I shouted. "What the heck?! You can't just do that!" She turned back around, neighed, and looked me in the eyes. "You're a spirit, aren't you? Just talk to me."

She gave me a sad look, then returned to the stable (for real this time).

"The heck was that about?" I groaned. "I guess it's not really her fault."

Forêt certainly hadn't been pulling any punches—or kicks in this case—but it had only hurt a tiny bit. She'd been trying to tell me that I was still strong without holy magic. And I'd repaid her kindness by demanding things of her.

“I should apologize tomorrow.” I hadn’t been fair to her, but I was glad to have realized it early.

After a small meal, I changed clothes and went to bed to get some more sleep. If the angel’s pillow didn’t ward off nightmares, I definitely wouldn’t have gotten much rest that night.

19 — Until We Meet Again

I woke up feeling extremely well-rested after my first night in a bed in over a month. Aside from not having my magic, that is.

“Well, I’m up,” I murmured. “Wonder if anyone else is.”

After ten days of being comatose, I had awoken rather early. It was still dim outside. I stretched a bit longer than usual to loosen up my stiff body, donned my armor, and took several breaths, repeating comforting words to myself.

Outside my room, Kefin was standing guard like last time.

“I couldn’t even sense you,” I said. “Thanks for being here.”

“It’s about all I can do now.” He avoided my gaze. Doubtless he was feeling guilty for having left us behind in the dungeon.

“I appreciate what you do. But anyway, there’s something I want to talk about.”

I asked him what had happened after they’d gotten back to Aecius. According to him, they had waffled over whether to leave the inn and make for Yenice or stay put until Brod and Lionel woke up. The Order of Healing was in Yenice, but going on the move would cause information to spread more easily. A week had gone by while they debated, and then the two both ended up recovering before a decision could be reached. But Kefin seemed unsure about how much time exactly had passed. I figured his confusion probably had something to do with Estia using the Spirit of Dusk’s power.

In any case, once the two were awake, Ketty and Kefin had started going out to gather more intel. Most of it consisted of rumors about the mountain returning to its original location, but the majority were outlandish predictions, like how it was supposedly a sign of disaster or the return of the Demon Lord. There was also word that Illumasia and Luburk may have been progressing in talks of an armistice and that civil war in Blanche was on the horizon as conflict between the nobles approached a boiling point.

“Cool, so nothing good,” I groaned. “Did Nadia or Lydia have anything to say about Blanche?”

“All we learned was that there’s a family conflict between a marquis and an earl,” Kefin answered. “They didn’t know what to make of it.”

“Looks like everywhere’s got their problems.”

The others had woken up while we talked, and we all ate breakfast before heading out to stock up on food. I took my Shurulian robe off and disguised myself as a regular adventurer. If someone injured or sick came up to me knowing who I was, I wouldn’t have been able to heal them. Frankly, I was expecting more people to recognize me since I’d done quite a bit of healing at the Adventurer’s Guild, but thankfully, we went by unnoticed.

After buying some food, I thought we’d head to the Doctor’s Guild to get some potions, but there were plenty at the general store. Once we were properly supplied, we returned to the inn and checked out of our rooms.

“So, what route are we taking home?” I asked.

“Through Blanche’d be the quickest, but things are a bit dicey there,” Brod answered. “It’s gonna take a lot longer if we try to cut straight through to Merratoni.”

The monsters we would meet weren’t the problem. Info leaks and people asking for healing were.

“We’ll have to go through checkpoints if we’re crossing borders,” I mused. “Let’s go with the one that lets us move more discreetly.”

“Blanche, then,” Nadia suggested. “They do have checkpoints, but a little coin will keep them quiet.”

“And there are byroads we can take if worse comes to worse,” Lydia added.

I blinked in surprise. “Are they safe?”

“Many Yenitian adventurers use them,” the younger sister replied.

“Sounds good to me. Let’s go with that.”

Blanche was supposedly filled with human supremacists, and I wasn’t in the

mood to deal with their kind. But there were probably a few profiteers who made their money off those byroads to consider too.

With that settled, we left Aecius.

Some time later, we saw a fortress in the distance marking the border and a checkpoint a little farther up. But we headed for neither of them. We were lucky that we never encountered any monsters, and after about half a day of travel, we spotted a small station—our destination.

Silhouettes were scattered around the area. As we approached, a gate fell, blocking the road. They were certainly on guard.

“Let me guess. They want money?” I asked.

“Yes,” one of the sisters replied.

“We could just cut the thing down,” Brod suggested.

“Master, I know you’re level one now, but I still believe you’d try, so I’m shooting that idea down while I can.”

“I believe we should send a herald,” Lionel offered.

“Ketty, Kefin, do you mind?” I asked.

“Not at all,” Kefin replied.

“Be right back,” said Ketty.

“Oh, here,” I called out. “Money.”

The two approached the gate, and less than a minute later it opened. Here I was, bribing my way through roads without even relying on my rank. It felt a little dirty, but then again I wouldn’t be getting outed this way, and we hadn’t exactly gone through official channels when first entering Yenice either. For that matter, what in the world was the purpose of those checkpoints if they were this easy to bypass? I sighed.

It was starting to get dark, so I suggested we camp in a field nearby, but the others said it wouldn’t be a good idea to linger in Blanche. We decided to make it to Yenice or Shurule before stopping.

Brod took the reins of the carriage while Lionel rode slightly ahead on his steed with Ketty and Kefin alert at his sides. Estia, Nadia, Lydia, and I sat in the back. Lionel had told us this would be the most effective formation in case of ambushes. With Ketty's and Kefin's perception skills, it was unlikely anyone would get the jump on us in the first place, though we hadn't tested that theory yet. They had grown exceptionally strong during our time in the Labyrinth of Wiles, though. Plus, if they could weaken a monster, Brod or Lionel could get the finishing blow and level up relatively quickly. It was our strategy from back in the labyrinth, only the roles were reversed this time.

Monsters did eventually appear, but they were weak. Only lupine-types, goblins, orcs, those sorts. Even I ended up deciding to hop out and do some fighting atop Forêt.

Suddenly, Brod and Lionel rode ahead of me. Wait, then who was driving the carriage? I looked back and saw Estia sitting where Brod was supposed to be, grimacing. Silently apologizing to her, I decided it was time I did something to compensate her for everything she'd done for us.

The two rivals' stats had been lowered enough that their agility was actually visible to the naked eye. Despite that, they still wove around the incoming attacks with ease, spotting openings and precisely exploiting them. We ended up not even having to weaken the monsters for them.

"Leveled up again!" Brod cheered. "This takes me back to my newbie days."

"I might have become an adventurer had I known it would be this enjoyable," Lionel remarked.

My master proceeded to ramble about his glory days, and Lionel simply listened, not supplementing the discussion with any war stories. Slaying monsters was one thing, but talk of slaying other people probably wasn't the best way to carry a conversation. Granted, Brod had surely taken down his share of bandits, so neither of them were exactly saints.

It must have been especially painful for Lionel, though. Killing may have been his profession, but he never seemed to like doing it to those who didn't deserve it. Unfortunately, you didn't get to choose who to cut down as a general in the Illumasian army.

Forêt suddenly brayed, scolding me for not keeping my mind focused. Speaking of Forêt, I had apologized to her after taking her out of the stable earlier, and she'd nibbled on my head in reply, meaning, I assumed, that we were good. Still, I suppose she really was like a partner to me if I felt comfortable enough around her to open up about my innermost worries. From her point of view, when she was cheering me up, she was probably doing it because the two of us relied on each other. All the more reason to try my hardest to get back into shape.

"When I get my holy magic back, you'll be the first one I use it on," I promised her. She neighed back.

A while later, we entered a forest to the southeast of Merratoni, where we camped for the night. I objected at first because it sounded dangerous, but Lydia assured me the spirits wouldn't let anyone (or *anything*) sneak up on us. So the forest it was.

We had a simple dinner, and Brod, Lionel, and I got the first sleeping shift while the others stood watch. The horses all seemed exhausted, and they gave me questioning looks as if asking why I wasn't healing them constantly as I usually did.

"I'm sorry," I gently told them as I opened the hermit key. "Rest up for tomorrow."

Lionel and Brod watched me send the horses to the stable with pained expressions. I returned their expressions with an awkward smile. Perhaps they wouldn't truly be saved until I restored my magic. That would take time, though. The only thing I could do now was change the subject.

"Hey, I noticed the scar on your face is gone, Master," I said. "Now that you're younger, I wonder if people'll start confusing us."

"What?!" he exclaimed. "It's gone?!" Clearly, that was news to him.

"That's what I said."

"It never went away with Extra Heal, so why now?"

Correction: it was *bad* news to him.

“Probably because you literally came back from the dead,” I proposed. “You went back to level one, so it’s not all that far-fetched.”

“Damn it, what am I gonna do if no one recognizes me?” he growled.

“You could say you’re your own long-lost son.”

“Yeah and look like a damn idiot when someone *does* recognize me. There’re some other flaws in that theory, but I’m not getting into it.”

“You might get to travel with me that way, though,” I said to tempt him.

“That sounds fun and all, but I’d rather people not think I’m dead. Not happening.”

Lionel was grinning as he listened.

“You look happy,” I commented.

“It eases my mind to know that the scars given to me when I was betrayed have vanished,” he said.

“I’m glad one of us is in a good mood.”

“Great, you got your honor or whatever; now, how do I get my scar back?” Brod asked in a huff.

“I’ll see what I can figure out when I can use magic again, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up,” I said.

“Fine,” he sighed.

The night continued on as we lazily idled the time away until the watch switched. The next morning, we got moving again, camped one more night, and were back in Merratoni on the third.

Once we were in town, we all but dragged Brod through the streets to the Adventurer’s Guild, where Galba and Gulgar were waiting for us. Unsurprisingly, they took one look at the guildmaster and immediately moved us to his office. By “us,” that meant only me, Brod, Galba, and Gulgar. I told everyone else to fill Nanaella and Monica in and to gather information.

My master and I began by explaining everything that had happened over the last two months. We were barely a few sentences in when I felt the two

brothers start to fume, but they remained quiet until we were done.

And then there was hell.

“What were you THINKING, Brod?!” Galba screamed. “I could understand taking a vacation to go help train Luciel. I agreed to that. But *not* to fighting demons and...the Wicked One?! If Luciel hadn’t been there, do you know where you’d be? DEAD! GONE!” He shifted his glare to me. “And you, Luciel. You can pretend to just be some ‘average healer,’ but you’re not. You represent *all* healers! As his apprentice, you should have stopped him before things got this far! *Look* at you! You broke a taboo and you’ve lost everything! What are you even going to do?!”

I’d never received an ear-lashing like this in my life. I could feel his angry eyes burning through me. Oddly enough, it made me happy. No one had ever cared about me enough to be this furious with me.

Galba snatched Brod’s collar. “I tried to contact you over and over and over. I know you weren’t in that labyrinth the whole time. Forget your position, Brod. Forget that you have responsibilities as a guildmaster. What about your promise to *us*? Did you forget? Do I need to remind you why we *chose* to retire young? It was to *teach people*, you son of a bitch! We wanted to return the Adventurer’s Guild to what it was always meant to be! A force for good! A force to protect the people who can’t protect themselves!”

Brod refused to look him in the eye.

“Galba, his level.” Gulgar grabbed his brother’s arm and freed it from Brod’s collar. “You’ll hurt him.”

“I know it’s hard,” Galba croaked. “We almost gave up. But Luciel got people working. The adventurers started improving. The people started trusting us with more jobs. Crime went down. These last few years, things were looking so bright.” He took a breath. “Brod. I know how much you care about him. But when you learn you have days to live, I wish you wouldn’t run away. I just wish you’d talked to us.”

Brod hung his head and simply replied, “I’m sorry.”

Galba regarded him for a moment, then sighed. He’d said his piece. Anything

more would have been cruel. But Brod wasn't their only target.

Galba turned his head to me with a grin. A very demonic grin, much like Walabis had once described.

"I'm letting you off for now," he said calmly. "But when you get your magic back, you and I are going to have a few lessons together."

"Y-Yes, sir," I stammered.

My resistance to mental damage was supposed to be level ten, yet the thought of training with him was chilling. Still, I was glad to be free of the verbal beating.

Then, I learned the real meaning behind that devilish smile.

"Good. I like your attitude," Galba said. "No wonder Brod says you're like a son to him. He's always going on about how he wants to raise you right, you know?"

"You bastard!" the victim cried.

There it was. Galba had exposed the words Brod would have rather died than say directly to my face. The guildmaster leaped for the beastman before the traitor could continue, but Gulgar was ready and restrained him from behind. There was no escaping for Brod, given the gap in their stats.

I couldn't believe my ears. Brod saw me as a son. But if that was the case, there were two others who looked at me in much the same way.

"I trust and care about you three a lot. I respect all of you," I told them.

If my master was my father, then Gulgar and Galba were like my (way) older brothers, always there, watching me grow up from the side.

Galba's terrifying smile finally relaxed into his usual kind grin. "When Brod heard about you founding a school, he was ready to quit the guild right then to start an academy for adventurers."

"Really? Well, that makes this whole thing kinda awkward."

"None of us really expected you to wind up involved with the fate of the world back then. We're still reeling a little."

“You’re telling me,” I groaned. Normal people didn’t live their lives intimately familiar with words like “demon” or “Eternal Dragon.”

“Don’t look so down,” said Galba. “Anyway, there’s a mountain of guildmaster work that’s piled up, so we can’t let your master go, and I’m sure he doesn’t want you seeing him so weak. You’ll have to be patient until he’s back in shape.”

“Leave him to us. You go getcher holy magic back,” Gulgar added. “And if that doesn’t work out, just come back and we’ll turn you into an SSS-rank adventurer. So stay kickin’ out there.”

The two brothers were still as kind as I remembered.

“Listen to ’em,” Brod said. “I can’t teach you anything as I am now. But I will be your master again. Just you wait.”

So, this was goodbye again. There wasn’t much to be done about it since he would have to retrain himself.

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“Contact us by arclink if anything happens. We’ll come runnin’.”

“I will.”

“Stay alive, Luciel,” Galba said. “We’ll all see each other again.”

“Right,” I replied. “My master’s in your hands. Don’t let him charge at every monster he sees.” I could at least trust them to do that.

“I might be reckless, but I won’t be stupid,” Brod retorted. “Already kicked the bucket once.”

“So, how are you going to explain the whole returned youth thing? We’re definitely not allowed to talk about the spell I used.”

“What spell?” Brod smirked cheekily. “I got cursed by a trap in the Labyrinth o’ Wiles.”

The wolf-man brothers grimaced, but no one had any better ideas, so they went with that.

“I think it’s time for me to go now,” I said. “Until we meet again.”

We all shared firm handshakes, and I left the office. On my way out, though, I remembered something and turned around.

“Don’t forget your Substance X when you’re not leveling up! Work on those resistances!”

“You little—”

I shut the door before my master could finish and regrouped with the others, where I found Nanaella and Monica waiting. They suggested that I leave the city later that night.

“I’m pretty sure word that you’re back’s already starting to spread,” Nanaella told me.

“Really?”

“You’re a popular guy,” Monica joked.

“Not as popular as you two,” I shot back.

There was no talking to the two receptionists without drawing eyes. No one was more famous among the adventurers than they were.



“So, um, Luciel...” Monica searched for the words, her cheeks turning red. “I know now might not be the best time to mention this, but...”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Have you heard of the...betrothal network?”

“Betrothal network?”

She must have meant for some king or high-ranking aristocrat or something. Nadia and Lydia had both had their marriages arranged, after all.

“You’re the only S-rank healer in the world, so countries everywhere are trying to get on good terms with you,” she explained. “You really had no idea?”

“No,” I replied. “I never planned on marrying some stranger. Unless...”

“Y-Yeah. I was told about it because I’m from Luburk. Nanaella too.”

“Mine came with some...stipulations.” Even Nanaella’s face was a dark crimson.

My mental age was being sort of dragged down by my physical age, so if you asked me whether I was romantically interested in the two of them, I would have answered yes. But as lame as it sounded, I wasn’t sure I had the emotional capacity to have multiple partners at once. I was glad they liked me enough to consider something like that, but my honest feelings on the matter were that it simply wasn’t the right time.

“If I were still living here at the guild, I think I’d be really happy and conflicted right now,” I confessed. “But as things are, I have no choice but to postpone whatever decision I ultimately make.”

“We understand,” Monica said.

“We’re still comrades, no matter what you decide,” Nanaella assured me. It was that kindness that I always found myself relying on. Maybe a bit too much sometimes.

“I’m going to say something that might sound a little low,” I said. “If either of you find someone special, feel free to forget the engagements. Until then, though, would you be my potential fiancées while you wait?”

“You’re right, that is low. Just kidding!”

“We know how passionate you are and how much you do,” Nanaella said.

“Make some time for us when things calm down,” Monica added.

“I will.”

Yes, everyone was watching this entire conversation. And yes, it was extremely embarrassing.

I took a nap in one of the resting rooms in the guildhall, and once the sun had set, we quietly left through the back exit.

Lydia was the first to notice Estia’s condition after we left.

“You look pale,” she said.

“I’m...fine,” Estia replied. But she wasn’t convincing anyone.

“I can’t heal you right now,” I said. “There’s an orphanage nearby that used to be a clinic. We should find a healer there.”

A potion could have healed a physical wound, but it wouldn’t do much good to a general feeling of unwellness. I led the way to the orphanage, and by the time we arrived, Estia’s face was nearly white as a sheet. Telling the others to stand by and wait, I picked her up and carried her inside.

“Excuse me! Anyone!” I cried out.

“Goodness, so loud. You’ll wake the children,” said a middle-aged man. He’d been one of Bottaculli’s healers when the place had still been a clinic. “Mister Luciel? What brings you here?”

The Healer’s Guild had been running the former clinic as an orphanage since Bottaculli’s removal.

“A friend of mine isn’t feeling well and she needs healing. I’d do it myself, but I’m...out of mana.”

“This is rather sudden,” the man muttered quietly at first. “But all right. Bring her here.”

Perhaps a few level-ups had bolstered his confidence. Thanks to the guild’s extensive support, the orphanage seemed to be doing well. Fortunately, it

seemed he had bought my excuse too.

“Thank you,” I said.

I followed him to the examination room, when suddenly the air around Estia changed as she switched with the Spirit of Dusk.

“That won’t be necessary,” she said. “I’d rather he answer a question. Did the man who used to run this clinic have any family?”

The healer blinked and looked at me. I didn’t have an explanation for him, but letting him spill the beans was better than having an angry spirit on our hands.

“I guess she’s okay now. Would you mind telling her what you know?” I asked.

“I had no idea Bottaculli’s investigation was still ongoing,” the man replied. “As far as I know, he had a wife, but she passed away shortly after having a daughter. The poor girl was plagued by an unknown illness her whole life that not even Bottaculli could heal. I’ve only heard bits and pieces of all the methods he tried.”

“Is the daughter still with us?” I asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. Thanks to a miracle medicine developed in Illumasia, I hear. It was terribly expensive, though, and the empire took Bottaculli’s daughter as collateral until he could pay off his debt. I’m afraid that’s all I know.”

“So he needed money, and that’s why he was selling off patients who couldn’t pay his fee to the empire,” I murmured.

“He wasn’t always that way, sir. Truly—”

“I’m aware,” the spirit said flatly before promptly leaving the building.

“Oh dear,” the healer said.

“Sorry about that. I’ll compensate you for your time. Buy the kids something nice to eat,” I told him.

“Thank you, sir,” he replied. “Oh, there was one other thing. I recall Bottaculli sometimes sending young ones with symptoms similar to his daughter’s to the empire as well. I’m not sure to what end.”

“Noted. If you’ll excuse me.”

I left behind five gold coins and followed the spirit. She was waiting outside.

“Did you get what you needed?” I asked.

“We’ll speak of it when Estia is well,” she replied quietly. “I’d like to meet with Fluna.”

“All right,” I said. She seemed impatient somehow. I turned to address the others and begin preparations to depart for the Holy City. “We’re moving out! Stay alert!”

We left Merratoni under cover of darkness. What I loved about Shurule was how we had such nice roads. You wouldn’t get monsters on your trail even if you used magic items to light your path.

I found myself wondering if Estia having worked at the Healer’s Guild had something to do with Bottaculli. I’d likely have to speak with the man himself if I wanted answers, which I wasn’t looking forward to, but if I could help Estia, I wanted to try.

20 — Regaining What's Been Lost

Traveling through the night, we reached the village where the demons had appeared around sunrise. Everything had returned to normal and they welcomed us warmly. I greeted the new mayor, and nothing much of note happened. Luckily, no one needed healing. Estia, however, was still unwell, and the spirit was still controlling her, so considering we might need her help to avoid any suspicion on the road (not to mention we were all exhausted from the journey), we decided to stop and rest. We would resume again after getting some sleep, but leaving at night would only arouse suspicion, so the plan was to leave the next morning. I dismissed everyone in the meantime.

Lionel stayed behind as my guard while Ketty and Kefin strolled around the village. Lydia offered to watch over Estia, but she declined, so Lydia ended up joining Nadia in teaching the village children a little swordsmanship.

I didn't have much to do myself, so I decided to cook some simple recipes like pudding and no-bake cheesecake. On second thought, though, no one else had my level of poison resistance, so unless I used cleansing magic on the ingredients, there was a chance someone would get food poisoning. Thus, my creations were ultimately stowed in my magic bag. The sweet aroma did attract a slew of questions from many women, however.

The next morning, we took our time leaving. When we saw the Holy City in the distance, the sun was setting, and to avoid unwanted attention, I put the horses back into the hermit key and waited for night to fall completely before entering. We needed to keep our return as discreet as possible, so we circled around from the main gate to the one reserved for knights. This gate closed at night and wouldn't open again until the sun rose, meaning there wouldn't be anyone on watch soon, but with the authority my ID card held, a single flash of it was enough to get the last sentry to let us through.

I pulled my hood over my face as the gate closed behind us. We rushed through side streets and avoided notice until we reached Headquarters.

Everyone kept pace, even Kefin with Lionel on his back.

“You’ve gotten more agile,” Lionel commented. It didn’t really feel like it, though, considering everyone was keeping up with me without breaking a sweat. All the same, it was good to hear.

“I owe it to you and Master,” I replied.

We finally made it to Church HQ. I started towards reception to inform everyone of my arrival, but Catherine was already waiting there, likely thanks to me having notified the pope ahead of time.

“Welcome back,” she greeted me. “Her Holiness told me to come meet you, but I think I see some new faces.”

It seemed she hadn’t been told the circumstances.

“Thanks for waiting,” I said. “There were some developments on my last mission, and she asked me to see her at once.”

“She really seemed in a state. I was wondering what had her so worked up.”

It could have been one of two things. Either me, an S-rank healer, losing his holy magic, or the fact that I’d faced off with the Wicked One himself. In any case, I had to get to the pope before people started asking too many questions.

“Maybe the demons have her nervous,” I suggested innocuously.

“True. People are talking about something massive happening near Merratoni lately.”

“That’s actually what initially sent me to Grandol and is partly why I’m back now. I saw a demon while I was abroad. And a strong one too.”

“A real one?” Catherine asked.

“As opposed to?”

“Remember the demons you dealt with a while back? We handled the corpses, and all but one eventually reverted to being human. The next day, they just disintegrated.”

Artificial demonification. The Wicked One could corrupt people and turn them undead, and that was scary and all, but demonification research had military

applications, which was even scarier.

“Meaning they were probably people who were turned *into* demons,” I said. “The demon I’m talking about, though, kept its form, unless it takes longer.”

“I see. Anyway, sorry, we shouldn’t be standing around here talking. Let’s go see Her Holiness. Everyone else can come along.”

Catherine kept stealing glances at the new, younger Lionel. I had to figure out a backup plan to keep her from asking the obvious question. On the way to Her Holiness’s chambers, I detailed the contents of my training, avoiding the topic altogether. I couldn’t tell her the truth, but I also didn’t want to lie.

When we finally reached the chamber, I breathed a sigh of relief as I followed her inside.

The attendants left as we entered, as usual. Catherine, however, remained.

“Luciel, it gladdens me to see you alive,” the pope said.

“Thank you, Your Holiness,” I replied. “I am happy as well to see you in good health.”

“I do not like flattery, healer.”

“Great. Then it’s good to see you again, Your Holiness.”

Her dignified air was refreshing, and I was glad she had invited me to see her despite the loss of my magic. Her next words threw me for a loop, though.

“Let us waste no time. Catherine has been informed in full of the current situation,” she said.

“How much is ‘in full’?” I asked.

“That you used the forbidden arts to revive your fallen master and follower, who had been corrupted by the Wicked One’s hand. And that it cost you your life as a healer.”

That made sense. I had been contacting the pope regularly via arclink crystal, and if she hadn’t been keeping Catherine up to date, it would have meant she didn’t trust her. So the reason Catherine had been glancing at Lionel was

related to other conflicting feelings, not curiosity about what had actually happened. As long as he, or any of my other friends, were still treated with respect, the odd glance or two was fine with me.

“Ah, then you stopped me to talk at reception for a reason,” I deduced.

“That’s right,” Catherine replied. “It was to throw anyone off your trail if someone were to try to figure out why you’d really come back.”

“Tell me that ahead of time,” I groaned. “I’m awful at hiding things.”

“You’re even worse at acting. You can hide lies decently enough, but it shows in the way you look around and blink more often.” She smiled at me. I wasn’t quite sure how to read it.

Personally, I had thought I’d put on the perfect poker face, but it made sense, I supposed. Catherine was politicking at HQ every day, so I was no match for her in the game of deception. Yeah, that was it.

“I’ll get right to it, then,” I said. “Would it be possible to promote or change my class entirely?”

“Indeed,” the pope replied. “Be seated before me, close your eyes, and calm your heart as you did before.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

I did as she said, taking a seat and breathing deeply. I felt her hand on my forehead and my body temperature rose.

“I see no paladin, no healer, no templar, nothing connected to holy magic within you,” she said. “I had hoped you might begin as a healer anew, but...alas.”

It was nothing I hadn’t expected, but it still hurt to hear. I just had to move on to the next lead.

“I didn’t get my hopes up,” I said. “If possible, I’d like to visit Neldahl like we discussed.”

“I thought you would be devastated. You are indeed strong of heart.”

If it looked like I was taking this well, it was not on purpose. This was a matter

of life and death to me, and I simply wanted to move on to my next option as quickly as possible.

“How soon could I leave?” I asked.

“The gate can be opened at any time. There is just...one problem,” the pope confessed.

“What is it?”

“I cannot allow you all to go. Only you and two others.”

It wasn't that surprising for the place to have a limit on visitors, but three was a little lower than I'd been hoping for. It was something, though.

I stood up and returned to the others. “Lionel, Ketty, Kefin, I want you all to stay behind,” I told them. “I'll have specific orders for you later.”

They all nodded and replied in the affirmative. I was going to have them leave the city. If there was still any bad blood from what they'd done in the past, I was confident Ketty and Kefin could handle it, and Lionel surely wanted to retrain himself. I didn't want anyone getting poisoned while I was gone.

“Nadia, Lydia, with me,” I said.

They nodded, followed, then bowed before the pope with me.

“These women are...?” Her Holiness requested.

“They were once Blanche nobles, Your Holiness, until they absconded to become adventurers,” I explained. “An encounter with a dragon led me to them.”

“A dragon? And Blanche, you say?” She sounded a little uncomfortable. Unsure.

“Lydia has been blessed by the Elemental, like you, and Nadia was chosen by the Draconis. They are the Sworn.”

The pope's expression seemed to change behind her veil. “By the divines. Your feats remind me of my father at times. Very well, then. It would appear their presence would be a boon for you.”

With that settled surprisingly fast, there was only Estia left. There was little I

could do for her, though, so she was best left to the pope.

“Understood,” I said. “I would also like to entrust Estia to you, if I may. She’s unwell and needs your help.”

“Luciel,” Catherine hissed, “you can’t just ask the pope to—”

“It will be so,” Her Holiness interjected. “Leave me Forêt Noire as well, if you would.”

I glanced at Estia. With both Forêt and the Spirit of Dusk, she would hopefully be stable. I nodded to her.

“When will you leave?” she asked.

“Tomorrow morning, if possible,” I replied.

“Very well. Catherine, show them to their quarters.”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” Catherine replied. “This way.”

Before following her, I called Forêt out of the hermit key. When she came out, she looked at me, then the pope, then back to me before nibbling on my head. Finally, she sauntered over to Her Holiness.

“You are well-liked,” the pope remarked cheerfully.

“We’re partners, she and I.”

Forêt’s reaction was minimal, but I took the flick of her tale to be one of agreement.

The plan was for me to stay in my old room while the others were provided with other lodgings. Before Lionel’s group could leave, I called out to them.

“Come to my room once your own chambers are in order,” I said quietly.

The three of them nodded subtly, then followed Catherine as she showed them the way. Once they were gone, I went to my own room, and they didn’t show up until about two hours later when a knock came at my door. I opened it to find Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin standing there, looking exhausted.

“What happened?” I asked.

"It seems word of our arrival has already spread, and we were bombarded with requests to teach and spar with...a number of people," Lionel answered wearily.

I had hoped to keep things quiet, but it seemed like our presence had been leaked by reception.

"It's hard being popular," I said. "Maybe we should've planned for this and gotten some help staying undercover."

"There's little to be done about it now."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. Anyway, I wanted to give this to you." I handed Lionel one of my spare magic bags.

"For what purpose, sir?" he asked.

"Infuse it with your magic. It's yours. I gave one to my master too."

"I see. To help regain my strength." He accepted and poured his magic into the bag. "Thank you, sir."

"Also, I have a letter for Dhoran if you see him in Yenice. I asked him to head there by arclink, so you should find him."

"We could have gone to gather him at Rockford."

"Yeah, but you don't have anyone waiting to see you in Rockford, do you?"

"Sir..." Lionel said softly.

"That's our chief," Ketty chimed in. She had Kefin, so no doubt Lionel would enjoy seeing Nalia again. Granted, Kefin seemed a little upset about not being able to accompany me.

"Plus, it just works out," I said. "When I told a certain pair that we have a lot of magic stones for them, they were ready to bolt to Yenice right then."

"I can't possibly imagine who," said Lionel sarcastically. A genuine smile crept onto his face for the first time in a while. He was strong, talented, and exceedingly dutiful, but I wanted him to focus on his own rehabilitation for now.

"I honestly have no idea when we'll be back from Neldahl, so I want you all to

equip yourselves with the gear we commissioned Dhoran and Grand to make. Get used to the new equipment, and I want you two to help Lionel get back into shape.”

Lionel, overcome with emotion, bowed on one knee, and the other two followed suit, stifling their laughter.

“By the time you return, I will have regained my former strength,” he replied.

“As long as the process stays within reasonable means,” I said. “It’s a lot easier for all of us to kick the bucket without my holy magic, so I’ll do whatever it takes to get it back.”

Until I did, any sparring with him or Brod was out of the question. Those sessions never ended without a few fresh cuts and bruises at minimum.

“Leave Sir Lionel to us,” Ketty declared.

“I won’t be with you, so please be sure to summarize the events in Neldahl on paper for me,” Kefin requested.

“Got it,” I replied. They smiled back at me. “I just want to make one thing clear. Do we really want to keep things as they’ve always been? As master and servant?”

I had to set this straight. At least in private, I wanted to speak with everyone as my friends.

“Yes. Servitude suits me,” Lionel replied. “And I owe my life to you. As such, I’d like to remain as we are.”

“I swear fealty to whoever, er...” Ketty interrupted herself. “I mean, I’m with whoever Sir Lionel’s with.”

What was that about? I wondered.

“My pact may be gone, but I still haven’t forgotten that I once assaulted you,” Kefin said. “For my crimes and the debt I’ve yet to repay, I would still like to serve you.”

Kefin’s new lease on life had started to make him sound a lot like Lionel. With the latter’s returned youth, the two even looked quite similar and might have made good friends.

“Personally, I think we could stand to make things a little more casual,” I suggested.

“We’re all accustomed to your style of speech, so by all means, continue to act as you have,” Lionel said.

Kefin nodded in agreement.

I sighed. “Look for the Lineage of the White Wolf when you get to Yenice. Tell them you know me and Brod and they shouldn’t give you trouble. Let them know about Nadia and Lydia too.”

“We’ll be right at home in Yenice,” said Lionel. “We will be sure to pass on the matter of the sisters.”

True, it wasn’t just me. Yenice was essentially home base to pretty much everyone here.

“One last thing. I have a favor regarding the Order of Healing...”

When I finished speaking, everyone agreed, although somewhat reluctantly. After I gave Lionel some money for his magic bag, the three of them exited the room.

Now that I was alone, it hit me that maybe I shouldn’t have decided to drag Lydia and Nadia to Neldahl with me without asking them first. Her Holiness seemed to like the idea, though, so maybe there was something to do with the spirits or dragons waiting for us.

“Just gotta go with the flow, I guess,” I murmured.

And so went my first night back at Church Headquarters.

21 — The City in the Sky

Early that morning, when it was still too dark out for normal folks to be awake, three horses were about to depart the city. After stopping by the Adventurer's Guild (on account of none of them having much in the way of IDs), they left for Yenice. They were to meet up with Dhoran partway. As I watched them leave, I felt a twinge of loneliness deep down but distracted myself with a firm pat on my cheeks to perk myself up.

Just as I was about to head to the training grounds to work up a sweat, someone called out to me.

"Luciel."

I turned around and saw a familiar face. "Good morning, Lumina. It's been a while."

"Good morning to you too," she replied. "I heard you returned last night."

"I'm sorry I couldn't come see you. How much have you heard about why I'm back?" I asked.

"Only some. But I believe you'll make it through it all, and whatever you don't, I will protect you from."

"I think that's supposed to be the guy's line," I answered with a laugh. "Careful, you'll make my heart skip a beat."

"Really? I only wanted to reassure you. Words are rather difficult."

"I like that side of you, but do try to leave some room for *me* to do the supporting every now and then."

"I'll look forward to that."

"You should."

Lumina smiled, and I felt myself being filled with courage.



“However, I’d prefer to see that strength displayed in a sparring match,” she said.

“You’ll have to wait until I get back from Neldahl.” I had to refuse, given I couldn’t heal any injuries now.

“That’s right. You’re off to Neldahl.”

“I have some new magical affinities, so I was thinking of studying magic for real. I’ve been begging Her Holiness to let me go for a while.”

“So you can come into different affinities. I see. Will you be changing your class?”

Could healers *only* use holy magic? “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it,” I said indecisively. “As long as I find a class that lets me use holy magic, I’ll be happy. Who knows, maybe I’ll end up a paladin.”

Lumina chuckled. “That would be interesting. There would almost surely be a scramble among the regiments to have you.”

“That would be less than ideal.” For an instant, I saw visions of bloodshed in my name. “I am technically an honorary Valkyrie, though. Don’t forget.”

“You’re a very well-liked man,” Lumina remarked. “I hope we’ll meet again soon.”

“Likewise. Oh, also, about the talk of demons. Stay on guard during your tours, even in small villages. I recommend imbuing your swords with holy magic if you ever come across one.”

“Noted. I will keep that in mind,” Lumina said. With that final remark, she headed off across the field.

I watched her leave. “I wonder why I feel more for her than the pair ‘fate’ supposedly chose for me. I need to get these feelings straight once everything’s back to normal.”

I regrouped with Estia, Nadia, and Lydia, and we headed to the cafeteria together. Other than the Valkyries, women were a rare sight in the Church, so the three of them attracted quite a few eyes. The sisters, being nobility, seemed

fine with the attention, but Estia looked like she was going pale all over again.

“Did you sleep well last night?” I asked her.

She covered her face with her hands and shook her head. “Not really.”

“Because of what happened at Merratoni or something else?”

“Both,” she said meekly.

“Might be best to let Her Holiness know. Feel free to tell us if you have anything on your mind.”

“Thank you.”

“I know this is going to be hard, but hang in there,” I said. “Seriously, go talk with the pope if it gets to be too much.”

Estia removed her hands, glanced at me, and smiled awkwardly. “Okay.”

Riding the momentum from my conversation with Estia, I turned to the sisters. “Nadia, Lydia. I’m sorry for dragging you guys along with me,” I said. “I should have asked you first.”

I started to bow deeply but remembered we were in public just in time to keep it appropriately shallow.

“We were surprised at first, but we’ve actually always wanted to see Neldahl,” Nadia said. “I’m quite excited, really. We should be thanking you.”

“We loved reading stories of heroes as girls,” Lydia added. “We’ve wanted to visit the floating city ever since we first learned about it, but only a select few in Blanche are allowed the privilege, and it requires the king’s permission. Even with our status, we were never distinguished enough to make our dream a reality. We truly are grateful.”

They really didn’t seem to mind that I’d basically signed them up for a trip all on my own. In fact, they were over the moon about it. The fact that they weren’t just telling me to make me feel better cleared away my guilt pretty fast.

Then I realized that I still had no idea why they had chosen to travel with me in the first place. There hadn’t been much time to ask.

“I’m glad you think so,” I said. “I want you both to study magic with me when

we get there, but you'll generally be free to do as you please."

"Really?" Nadia asked.

"Are we not accompanying you as attendants?" Lydia asked.

Neldahl was supposedly a pacifist city, so it would probably be nice and quiet.

"I don't plan to make you two do anything," I answered. "Actually, there is one thing. When we arrive, I need to find the fountain in the center. You should be ready for anything."

"A scuffle should be no trouble," said Nadia.

"I promise we'll be helpful this time," Lydia declared.

The two struck me as seasoned adventurers far more than aristocratic ladies. Not even Brod and Lionel's training had broken them, although it might not have been as harsh as what the rest of us had gone through.

After eating, we were about to head to the pope's chambers before the Valkyries came for breakfast. But the moment we left the hall, we bumped right into them.

"Hey, it *is* Luciel," Gannet said.

"It's been some time," Elizabeth greeted me.

"We've missed you," added Ripnear.

Suddenly, I had the vague feeling that I was in great danger.

"Apologies, Luciel," Lumina said. She frowned. "They nearly lost their heads when I told them I'd met you and that we'd be leaving on another deployment soon."

I had an inkling of their goal. "I have plenty of honey, but who can hold on to it responsibly?"

Marluka came forward. "I shall do it!"

"I handle the alcohol *and* the money," Lucy argued. "Naturally, I should be responsible for the honey too."

Sparks started to fly between the two girls.

“Was this, uh, an issue before?” I asked.

“Not at first,” Lumina replied. “After some time, though, things...devolved.”

“What if you managed the honey?”

“I can think of nothing more perilous.”

“Lady Lumina likes things in order, but she doesn’t know what she’s doing when it comes to food,” said Kathy.

“Never let our captain handle rations,” Beatrice added.

Okay, so that was out. Queena liked mead, so maybe she or Saran would be good for the job? Or maybe Myla, since she was the strong, quiet type. I glanced at them curiously, but they averted their gazes.

“Please, Luciel,” Lumina pleaded. “Not them. Not another catastrophe.”

“Then it’s yours, Gannet,” I said. “If there are any other problems next time, you’ll have to be replaced, though.”

“I got this!” she cheered.

“Do you have a magic satchel?”

“Yup. Be right back!” Gannet trotted off to her room.

“Luciel, I’d like to commission a weapon from Dhoran,” Myla said.

“You might not get it for a while, but I can pass the details along if you want,” I replied.

“I would appreciate it.”

“Looks like you’ve got something you wanna ask,” Queena remarked.

“Perceptive,” I said. “This is Estia, a spirit magic user like the pope. She’s with Her Holiness, though, so she can’t leave. If you see her, just don’t be a stranger.”

“Why not make her yours?” Saran asked. “Wait, that came out wrong.”

Oh, was she done with the whole “dirty old man” character? I had figured it was only a matter of time, considering how feminine she seemed at her core.

“You can rest easy with us here,” Lumina reassured me. “We’ll make her feel

welcome.”

“Um...thank you,” Estia replied shyly.

Gannet returned as quickly as she said she would. I handed over the honey and mead, and as we passed each other to depart for our respective destinations, Nadia and Lydia turned back to Lumina before she could disappear into the dining hall.

“You’re Luminalia. One of Francisque’s daughters,” Nadia said.

“We’re from the Berkeley family,” Lydia added.

Lumina froze, then told the others to continue on without her. They looked back at me, I nodded, and they went inside.

“That was my name once,” Lumina replied. “No more, though. Please refrain from using it, as I have no more ties to my home.”

“I... I apologize,” said Nadia. “But there’s something the Radiance Dragon wished me to tell you if we were to meet.”

“And I have a message from the spirits,” Lydia said.

“A dragon and...spirits?” Lumina echoed. She blinked in shock. “Luciel?”

I was just as surprised as her. I didn’t have much of a choice but to tell her the truth. “They’re mystics chosen by the Draconis and the Elemental at their coming-of-age ceremonies. They escaped their arranged marriages and ran away from home, all under their deities’ guidance.”

“Sir, you’re not exactly wrong, but your retelling lacks elegance,” Nadia scolded me.

“You left out the part where we were going to be made concubines for a forty-year-old man’s harem,” Lydia said.

I felt Lumina’s harsh, critical gaze. “Sorry,” I said.

“Luciel, you never fail to amaze me.” Lumina sighed dramatically. “So, what is this message?”

““One of righteous will has ventured forth without the dragons’ blessing. When the righteous one seeks power, they shall find it in lands of old,”” Nadia

quoted.

““One with eyes of the arcane has ventured forth without divine guidance. When the righteous one seeks aid, it shall be found among spirits, a prisoner of spacetime,”” Lydia continued.

“And what does that have to do with me?” Lumina asked.

“Ever since your coming-of-age ceremony, Lady Luminalia, none in Blanche have earned the holy or light magic affinities,” said Nadia.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, My Lady, but you possess the ability to perceive magical auras, do you not?” asked Lydia. Lumina was silent, stunned. “Then I was right. Mister Luciel, I believe Lady Luminalia is the true patron of the Elemental.”

“And the Draconis as well,” Nadia added.

No one said a thing for a while. If that were true, that would mean that my fated one—my soulmate—the person the dragons and spirits were always going on about was...Lumina. Neither of us knew what to make of this truth.

“Lumina,” I said, breaking the silence, “I probably won’t be back from Neldahl for a few months. When I return, may I have some of your time?”

“Oh, er, yes. Um, yes, of course,” she stammered. “Come back safe.”

“You be careful too.”

“Right.”

Everything after that was a bit of a blur, but eventually I found myself in the pope’s chamber, having my head nibbled by Forêt Noire.

“My friend. My partner. Why must you always do this?” I pleaded.

Forêt did not stop biting me. I gave up trying to reason with her, and some time later, she returned to Her Holiness’s side, satisfied.

“I apologize for that, Your Holiness,” I said.

“It is understandable that one should feel lonely when their other half will be leaving so soon,” she replied, a smile evident in her voice.

Forêt neighed, as if pouting. Along with her and the pope, only Estia, Nadia,

Lydia, and I were present in the room.

“Seeing as you’ll be taking care of her for the time being, I should give you this,” I said.

“A key?”

“It’s a magic item called a hermit key. That one is a stable, and all you have to do is imbue it with magic and turn it in the air. Forêt can eat, rest, and get cleaned up inside.”

“How very convenient,” the pope remarked.

“It’s been invaluable on my travels. I don’t know how long I’ll be in Neldahl, so I wanted you to have it for now.”

“Forêt Noire will be in good care. You have my word.”

I couldn’t leave her there forever, of course, and being locked up inside forever would put an awful lot of stress on her. Estia could have taken care of her, but then I’d worry the two would wind up being codependent. So the pope was my best option.

“Thank you,” I said. “Also, about Estia, she’s shy and not quite used to attention. I also think she’s dealing with a bit of trauma, so please watch out for her too.”

“I will, as a bearer of the Elemental’s blessing should for their fellow spirit mediums,” Her Holiness replied. “You know, you’re the only one to ask so much of me.”

I could again hear a smile in her voice. But I turned around and saw that the other two were kind of frozen in place, so I moved things along quickly.

“Now then, not to rush things, but how might we be transported, Your Holiness?” I asked.

“Follow me,” she replied.

She moved into a room on my right, and the rest of us followed. I thought I’d get to see her face again, but she still wore a veil, presumably to hide it from the others. The room was windowless and dim, illuminated by a single lit candle on a stand. The only other feature was the giant magic circle drawn on the

floor.

“Is this where we’re being transported from?” I asked.

“Yes,” the pope answered. “This process is to prevent interference from ambient mana.”

Lord Reinstar was probably the genius behind that idea. He never seemed to stop surprising me. Who knew what kind of crazy stuff his spacetime magic could have done, but he probably hadn’t been the type to use it for selfish gains. But in that case, couldn’t he have done something about the Wicked One?

The pope directed us to stand in the middle of the circle, and we obeyed.

“Take this with you. It will ensure safe passage,” she said, handing me a letter.

“Who do I give it to?” I asked.

“The guildmaster of the Sorcerer’s Guild, which heads Neldahl’s operations. He will surely be of use to you.”

“The Sorcerer’s Guild, *not* the Mage’s Guild. Got it. Thank you, Your Holiness.”

The pope nodded, smiling, and firmly touched a staff to the circle. It began to glow until my vision became a field of white and a strange sensation came over me. The sensation of solid ground disappeared from under my feet, and it felt like I was floating in the air, weightless. Teleportation in labyrinths was never anything like this.

As the light faded, we found ourselves in another dimly lit room not unlike the one we had just been in with the pope. For a moment, I doubted that we’d teleported at all, but I could sense none of the pope’s magic. In fact, I felt many *more* presences.

“Is everyone okay?” I asked.

“Yes. It felt a little strange, but I’m all right,” Nadia replied.

“I’m okay too,” said Lydia.

After confirming their safety, I opened the door before us. On the other side

was an astonishingly beautiful room, decorated with ornate furnishings and brightened by streams of natural sunlight.

“This is amazing,” I remarked.

“It’s beautiful,” said Nadia. “I’ve never seen such fine decorations.”

“We must be in the City in the Sky. This is amazing,” Lydia murmured in awe.

Vlad would have done well to follow Lord Reinstar’s example as one of the reincarnated. Maybe then he wouldn’t have been consumed by vengeance. But we couldn’t stand around admiring the interior design forever. I glanced around at our surroundings.

“Eight doors. One for every country, and then some.” I didn’t know if every room was for teleportation, but there was no point wondering. I shifted gears. “First, we need to find the Sorcerer’s Guild.”

“Right,” the sisters said in unison.

There was much to be worried about, but when I opened the door labeled “Entrance,” I did so with the hope that things would be better.

Afterword

It's been a while. Broccoli Lion here. Thank you so much for reading *The Great Cleric* volume eight. Personally, I'm extremely relieved that it's finally managed to reach your hands at all.

I started work on this volume around the end of January of this year (I remember it being cold, at least). One thing after another led to my first draft being extraordinarily late, though, causing my editor, Mister I, as well as some no end of trouble. I have nothing but gratitude for Hiroyuki Akikaze for continuing the diligent work on the manga despite all that, and for all the readers who continue to support me.

I'm going to do everything I can to make sure the next volume is a little more timely.

Anyway, it's been some time since I last wrote one of these, so I agonized quite a bit over what to talk about here. I tried writing about something interesting at first but failed miserably at that, so now I'm doing it over again.

As may be evident to you readers, I am a very disorganized person, so I've never been good at keeping up with daily journals or things like that. I have, however, kept up rather diligently with a monthly diary, and I recently started flipping back through it. Before long, I ended up reading through every single entry from the beginning. I rediscovered many of my past troubles, aggravations, and struggles, but the most notable bits were the entries leading up to *The Great Cleric's* publication.

I touched upon this a little bit in volume seven's afterword, but things were a little rocky for me once the novelization process kicked off. I had this obsessive fear that maybe they would revoke the decision to publish me if I stopped updating the light novel as frequently, but I was also extremely excited. And then back during volume three there was so much I just couldn't figure out how to convey in my writing, which led to much trouble for Mister I.

There were a lot of things in that diary that were hard to look back on. Reading through it all made me remember a lot of regret, shame, and guilt that I'd prefer to forget. At the same time, though, it makes me grateful for Mister I and a little sad for the readers.

But I'd like to use all these memories and feelings to better express my thanks to all of you, and to move forward. I'll continue to do my best to become deserving of your support, and I hope to see you again in the next volume.

One last time, my deepest thanks go out to everyone involved in *The Great Cleric* as well as all its readers. Thank you all, truly.

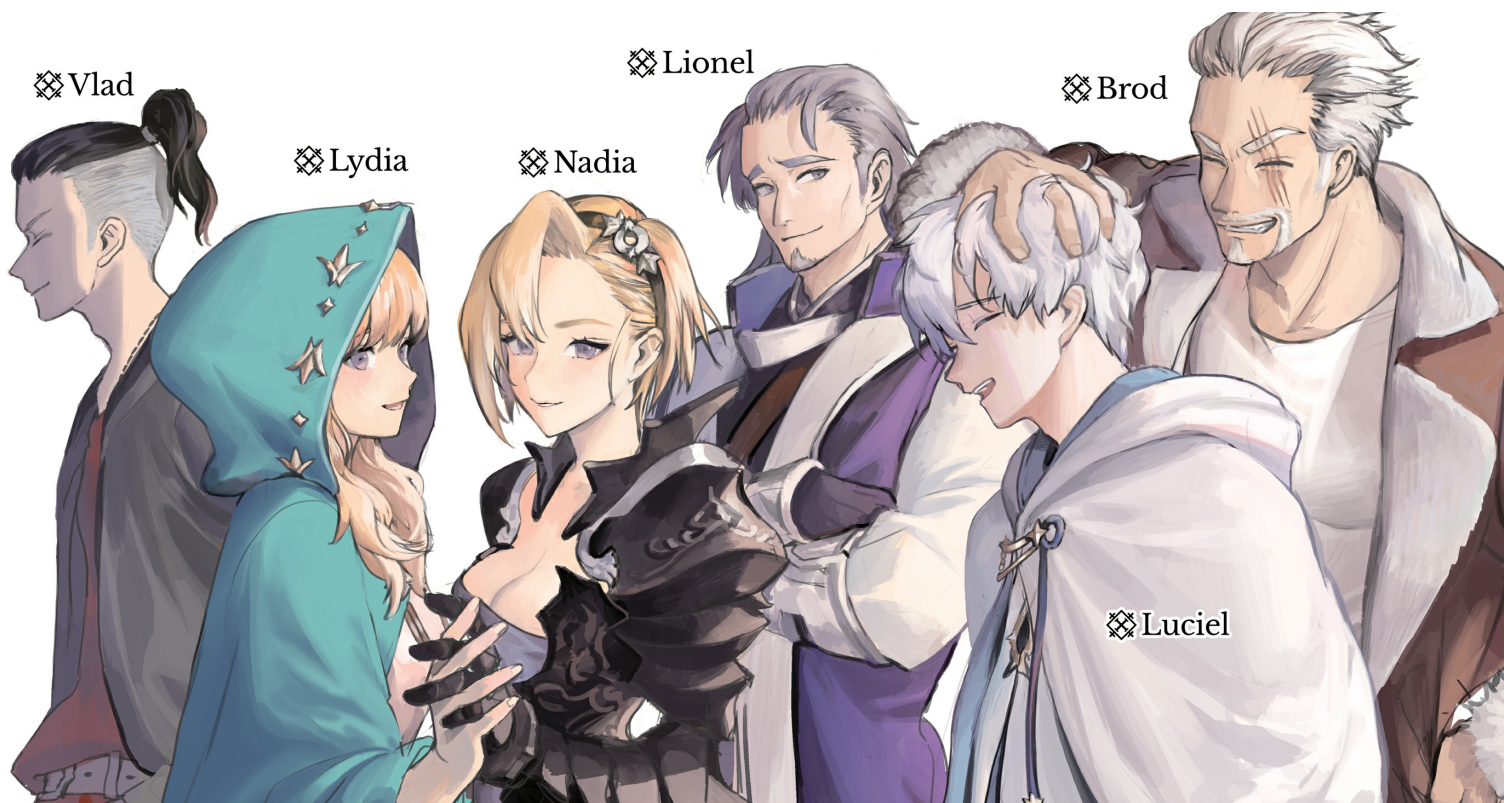




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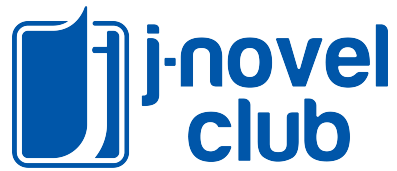
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The Great Cleric: Volume 8

by Broccoli Lion

Translated by Matthew Jackson Edited by Tess Nanavati

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